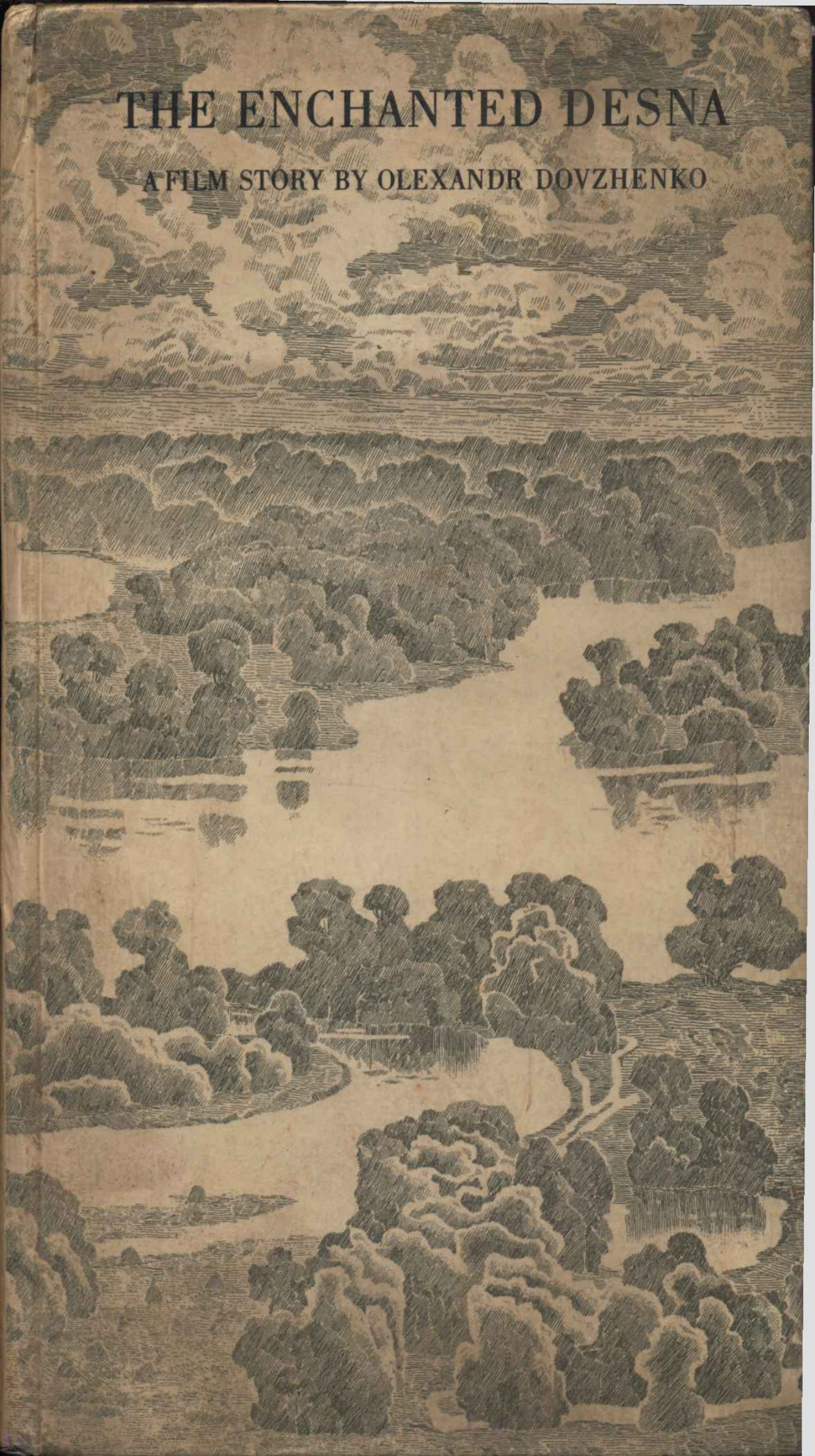
THE ENCHANTED DESNA

A FILM STORY BY OLEXANDR DOVZHENKO



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ОЛЕКСАНДР ДОВЖЕНКО

ЗАЧАРОВАНА ДЕСНА

Кіноповість

Translated from the Ukrainian by Anatole Bilenko

Illustrated by Olexandr Ivakhnenko

Olexandr Dovzhenko (1894-1956) was on outstanding Soviet Ukrainian film director, prose and scenario writer, and winner of USSR State prizes and the Lenin Prize. In 1958, at an international film festival in Brussels, his film The Land *was included in the twelve best motion pictures of all times and peoples. Dovzhenko influenced the cinema of many countries, especially Italy.*

Dovzhenko's world outlook and creative methods were shaped by the October Socialist Revolution of 1917. His films are a whole epoch in the history of Soviet cinema. With a great deal of mastery they depict the heroic struggle of our people in establishing Soviet power (Arsenal, *1929;* Shchors, *1930*), *the socialist changes in the countryside* (The Land, *1930*), *the courage and devotion of the Soviet people in the war against fascism* (The Story of the Fiery Years, *1944-1945*), *and the moral grandeur of his contemporaries building the bright future of their country* (A Poem about the Sea, *1956*). *Epic treatment of themes and profound lyricism are the main features of Dovzhenko's works.*

During the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 Dovzhenko wrote several stories, sketches and publicistic articles. His best stories — Mother, The Night before the Battle, *and* It Cannot Be Forgotten — *express his firm belief in the Soviet people's victory over the nazi invaders. In 1942, in his diary, Dovzhenko made the first entries about his childhood, which he later used in the autobiographical story* The Enchanted Desna *(1954-1955). It was not without reason that during this severe time for his country he wanted to write a book about the formation of a generation which was to build a new world and later defend it in the years of hard trials.* The Enchanted Desna *is a real poem about the making of man, the moral beauty of those who work the land, and the charming nature of the author's native countryside. The story is imbued with deep lyricism and gentle humor. It would not be far-fetched to say that by writing this realistic and philosophical story Olexandr Dovzhenko provided his readers with a key to understanding his entire heritage.*

Александр Петрович Довженко

Зачарованная Десна

Киноповесть

(На английском языке)

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Before starting this short outline for an autobiographical film story the author would like to make a confession: his daily life is being invaded by an ever-increasing host of memories.

What evokes them? It might be the long years of separation from the land of his forefathers, or it might be that he has reached the moment all men reach, when the tales and prayers they learned in their distant childhood surface in their memory and suffuse their entire existence, wherever they may live.

Or it might be a combination of both, added to that insuppressible desire for self-knowledge manifested when we recall the cherished childhood fancies from our earliest years which always show through somewhere in our deeds. And it is also true with regard to the first poignant joys and sorrows of our childhood passions...

What a beautiful and cheerful place our garden was! As you walked out of the entrance hall you were overwhelmed by its luxuriant greenery. In spring it was a riot of flowers. And in early summer with its cucumbers, pumpkins, potatoes, raspberry and black currant bushes, tobacco, beans, sunflowers, poppies, beets, orachs, dill and carrots in bloom it was a feast for the eyes. There was nothing our indefatigable mother did not plant in that garden.

"There's nothing in the world I love more than planting something in the ground and watching it grow. It makes me happy to see all kinds of plants come pushing out of the earth," she liked to say.

The garden was so crowded with plants by midsummer that there was no room for them all. They climbed on each other, interweaved, shoved and pushed, clambered up the sides of the barn and over the thatch, crawled up the wattle fence, and the pumpkins hung over the fence right into the street.

And the raspberries — red and white! And the cherries and sweet pears; at times I would go around with a stomach as taut as a drumskin after glutting myself on these goodies.

I remember, too, the large tobacco patch in which we children roamed like in a forest, and where we got the first callouses on our tender young hands.

Along the wattle fence, beyond the old cattle barn, grew large bushes of currant, alder and other unknown plants. Here our hens, stealthily from Mother, used to lay their eggs as did the smaller birds. We rarely visited these parts. It was dark here even by day, and we were afraid of snakes. To think how all of us were afraid of snakes in childhood, and then how many of us actually ever saw one at any time in our lives?

Near the cottage, which stood in the orchard, there

grew flowers, and beyond the cottage, just across from the door by the cherry trees, there was an old wormwood-covered cellar with an open hatch, which permanently gave out a smell of mould. The murky depths of the cellar were inhabited by toads, and, in all probability, snakes too.

Grandpa liked to sleep on top of the cellar.

Our Grandpa looked very much like God. When I prayed and looked in the icon corner I would see a portrait of Grandpa wearing old silver-foil vestments, while in fact, he would be lying on the *pich* * and coughing quietly as he listened to my prayers.

On Sundays a little blue lamp always burned before

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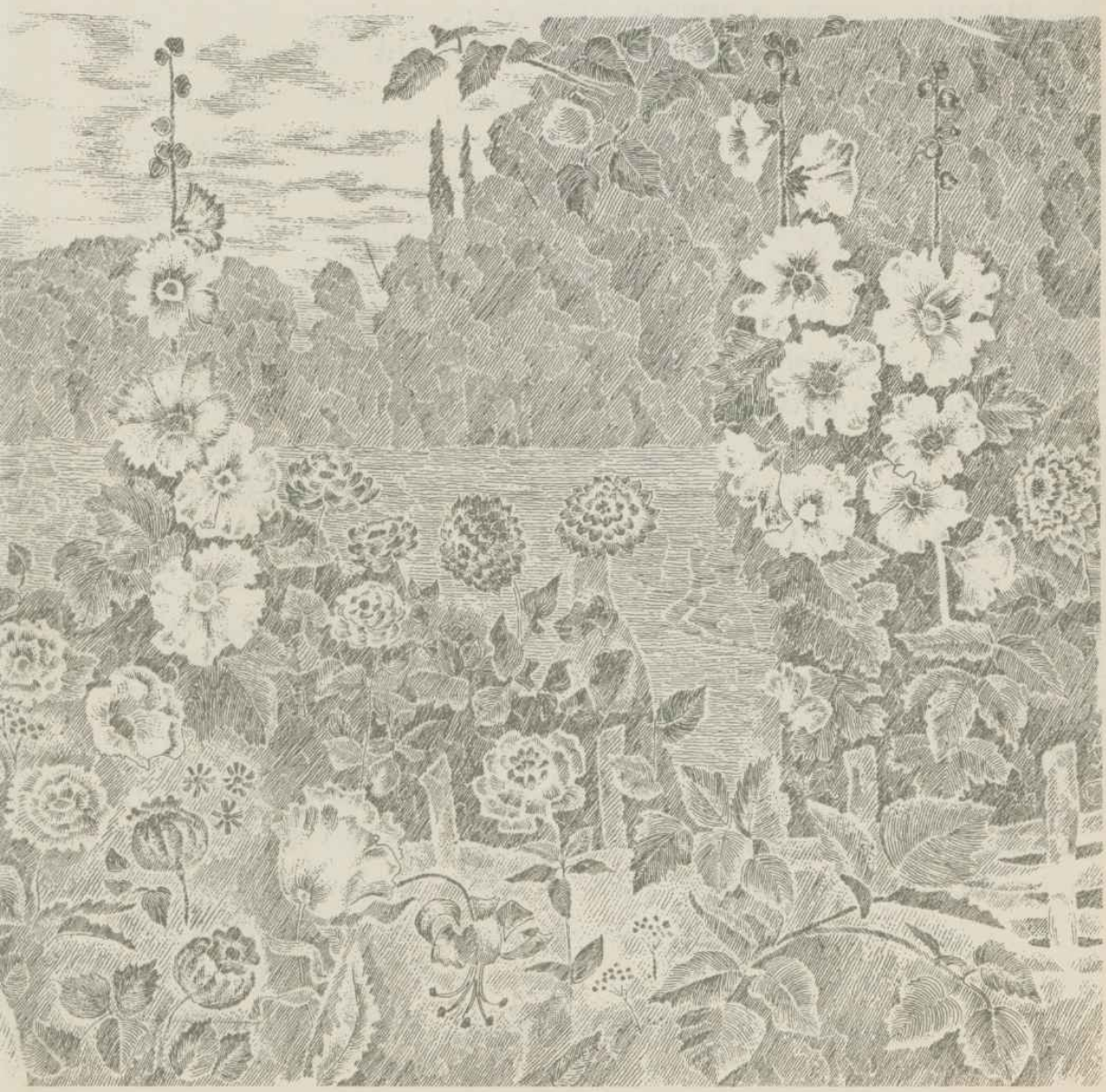
* *pich* — The stove that occupied a central place in Ukrainian peasant homes. It was built in such a manner as to provide sleeping space above the oven area.



the icons, and attracted a cloud of flies. The icon of St. Nicholas also looked like Grandpa, especially when he trimmed his beard and downed a shot of pepper *horilka* * before dinner and Mother was in a good mood with him. St. Theodosius looked more like Father God, who as I said looked like Grandpa, appeared to hold a round salt-cellar in one hand, while the three fingertips of his other hand reached for a head of garlic.

Grandpa's name, as I found out later on, was Semen. He was tall and lean, with a high forehead, long wavy hair, and a white beard. From his younger years when he was a *chumak* ** he had inherited a large hernia. Grandpa smelled of warm earth and a little bit of a flour mill. He was a literate man in a religious way and loved to intone the Psalter in a solemn voice on Sundays. Neither Grandpa nor we understood what he read, but it had a mysterious quality which excited us and lent the strange words a special sense.

Mother hated Grandpa and thought he practiced black magic. We did not believe her and defended Grandpa from her attacks, because the Psalter was not black inside, as she insisted, but white, while the thick leather cover was brown like buckwheat honey or an old bootleg. Finally, Mother secretly destroyed it, burning it in the stove one leaf at a time, afraid to burn it in one piece lest it explode and blow the stove to smithereens.

Grandpa loved a good talk and always had a kind word for people. At times, on his way to the meadow, when someone asked him the way to Borzna or Baturin, he would stand for a long time in the middle of the road, waving his whip-handle and shouting after the traveler: "Now you go straight ahead and don't turn anywhere!... There goes a good man, may God grant him good health." He would sigh benignly as the traveler disappeared from view.

"Who's that man, Grandpa? Where's he from?"

"God knows — I don't... Hey, what's all this? Why are you standing there like a brick wall?" he would say to the horse, as he got on the wagon. "Come on, get moving, you..."

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* pepper *horilka* — a brand of Ukrainian vodka

** *chumak* — ox-cart driver transporting fish, salt, and grain

He was our good spirit of the meadows and the waters. None of us could hold a candle to him when it came to gathering mushrooms and berries in the forest, and he talked with the horses, calves, grass and with the old pear tree and oak — with every living thing that grew and moved around us.

And when at times we went fishing with a dragnet or a trammel net and took our catch to his summer hut, he would smile and ruefully shake his head attempting to reconcile himself with the rapid march of time.

"Bah, and you call that fish! It's anything but fish. You should have seen the fish there were in my day. Now when I and old Nazar, God rest his soul, used to go..."

At this point Grandpa would take us on such a fascinating tour of olden times that we held our breath and stopped slapping away at the mosquitoes on our legs and necks, leaving them to feast on our flesh and blood. It would be long past sunset and the large catfish would leap in the Desna under the stars as we listened agog till we dozed off in the fragrant hay under the oaks by the enchanted Desna River.

Grandpa regarded the tench as the best fish of all. He fished in the lake without a dragnet or a trammel net. He scooped them right out of the water with his bare hands like a Chinese magician. It was as though they swam right into his fingers. People said that he knew a special spell for this purpose.

In summertime Grandpa frequently lay on the cellar closer to the sun, especially at midday when it was so hot that all of us, including the cat and dog and chickens, hid among the lovage, currant bushes and tobacco. That was the time he enjoyed most...

Grandpa loved the sun above everything else in the world. He lived under the sun for about a hundred years, never hiding in the shade. And when his time came he died under the sun, lying on the cellar near the apple tree.

Grandpa was given to coughing. At times he coughed so long and loud that hard as we tried we could not outcough him. His coughing boomed throughout the whole neighborhood.

Old people even predicted the weather by the way he coughed.

At times when the sun was especially hot he coughed himself blue and roared like a lion, clutching his hernia and kicking his feet in the air just like a small baby.

At that our dog Pirate, who slept at Grandpa's side on the grass, would start from his sleep, make for the bushes in fright, and bark at Grandpa from there.

"Stop barking at me, will ye. Why should you be barking anyway," Grandpa complained.

"Bow-wow!"

"Oh go and choke on a bone! Cough-cough!..."

Thousands of little pipes would start squealing inside Grandpa.

The cough in his chest gurgled long and ominously like lava in a volcano, and when it reached its highest

pitch and Grandpa was as blue in the face as a morning glory, the volcano burst into action and we all took to our heels pursued by his thunderous howling and groaning.

Once when I was running away from Grandpa's bellowing, I jumped from under my currant bush right into the tobacco patch. The tobacco was tall and very, very dense. Just then it was blooming in large golden bunches like the embroidery on a pope's chasuble, and over this chasuble the bees swarmed in thousands. The large tobacco leaves immediately swallowed me up. I fell into the green covert and started to crawl toward the cucumber patch.

The bees were also swarming over the cucumbers. They busied themselves around the flowers and flew so quickly to sunflowers and poppies and back home

again that much as I tried to tease them none of them stung me. A bee's sting is very painful, take my word for it, but when I would burst out bawling Grandpa or Mother would immediately give me a copper kopeck to press against the aching place. Then the pain would fade in no time and the coin would buy me four candies at Masiy's store, which would keep me happily sucking till evening.

After watching the bees and eating my fill of cucumber buds, I came across the carrot patch. For some reason I loved carrots more than everything else. In our garden they grew in straight bushy rows between the cucumbers. I looked around to see whether I was being watched. There was no one in sight. Around me there was only the dense tobacco, poppies, tall corn stalks and sunflowers. The midday sky was clear and it was so quiet you had a feeling every living thing had fallen asleep. Only the bees buzzed and from somewhere beyond the tobacco patch came Grandpa's howling. At this point Pirate and I fell on the carrots. I pulled out one — it was too small. The top was big, but the carrot itself tiny, pale and not sweet at all. I pulled out another — even thinner. And a third one — also thin. I wanted a fat, juicy carrot so badly I was trembling all over! I pulled up the whole row, but did not find a single carrot to my satisfaction. I looked around — what next? So I stuck the carrots back into the ground: let them grow till they're ripe, I thought, and went on in search of something tasty.

I wandered around the garden for a long time. After trying the carrots I sucked the honey out of the tobacco and pumpkin flowers growing along the wattle fence, tried some green poppy capsules with white milky seeds, ate some resin from the cherry trees, bit into a good dozen sour green apples, and was about to go home when all of a sudden I saw Grandma, who was actually Grandpa's mother, shuffling around the carrot patch. I took to my heels. She noticed me and came heading my way. So I — oh well, where could I run? — cut through the sunflowers knocking down one stalk after another.

"Where are you running, you little scamp?"

I slipped into the tobacco patch. I'll run into the raspberry bushes, I thought, and from there I'll crawl through the tobacco. Pirate followed on my heels.

"Stop breaking the tobacco, may your hands and feet break! And may you rot in that tobacco patch till doomsday. May you wilt, you brat, like those carrots which your filthy hands tore out!"

Without going deeply into a historical analysis of some of our cultural tenets of old, it should be noted that the common people in this Ukraine of ours did not believe much in God. Individually they believed more in the Virgin Mary and the Saints — Nicholas, Peter, Elijah, and Panteleimon. They also believed in the Evil Spirit. It's not exactly that they disregarded God; out of sheer considerateness, they did not venture to trouble him personally. Those who were courteous enough, like my parents, shared the humble opinion that their everyday interests were unworthy of God's intervention.

That's why they addressed their prayers to the lower deities, such as Nicholas, Peter and others. The women followed their own line of supplication: they confided their complaints to Our Lady, and she passed them on to God the Son or to the Holy Ghost.

We believed in church holidays. I remember Grandma often used to say: "May Holy Christmas smite you" or "May Holy Easter smite you."

So, Grandma swept through the tobacco at full speed and reaching the garden, she fell down on her knees. Just as Grandpa liked the sun, his mother, who, as I found later, was called Marusina, liked to curse. She cursed everything that caught her eye — the pigs, hens and piglets for their squealing, Pirate for his barking and dirty habits, the children, the neighbors. The cat she cursed about two or three times a day with the result that the poor creature eventually developed some disease and pegged out somewhere in the tobacco patch.

She was small and alert with such keen, sharp eyes that nothing in the world could hide from her. She could go without food for three days. But she couldn't live a single day without cursing. That was her spiritual food. On the least pretext the curses would flow from her mouth in an unending stream like verse from a poet

inspired. At such times her eyes would glisten and her cheeks flush. All the creativity of her ardent and aging soul was channeled into these outbursts.

"Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin," Grandma cried to the skies, "my ministering spirit, my holy martyress, smite that dunderhead with your holy omophorium! Our merciful Lady, twist and pluck out his little hands and feet just like he plucked those carrots out of the damp ground, and break his little fingers and joints. Queen of Heaven, my merciful mediator, intercede on my behalf, hear my prayers, that he grow not upward, but downward, that he never hear the holy cuckoo or the thunder! Come, St. Nicholas, trusty friend, St. George on your white steed in your white saddle, bring down your punishing hand on him that he never eat those carrots, let him be devoured by the blight and all other diseases, let him rot in his boots..."

Grandma crossed herself so passionately in the direction of the sky that she nearly collapsed.

Under the raspberry bushes lay a little angel cast down from the skies and crying without tears. Somehow with no warning he had fallen from the cloudless blue onto the ground and broken his tender wings near the carrots. That was me. Cowering quietly under the raspberry and currant bushes, I listened spellbound to Grandma's condemnations. I was afraid to stir a finger lest the Blessed Virgin see me from above hiding here under the bushes. Even Pirate looked at Grandma with fright.

I don't know how Grandma's verbal fury would have ended. Maybe my hands and feet would have really been twisted out of their joints if it were not for the quiet voice of Grandpa who had been roused from sleep by his mother's curses.

"Mom, could you bring me some stewed fruit?" he said. "Something's burning in my guts!"

"What? You still lying around there? May you never stand up!"

And Grandma diverted her wrath toward the cellar.

"All right, all right I'll bring it now, may you be blighted, may you eat and never have your fill, may you burst, you should've popped off in your cradle!..."

Grandma went toward the cottage with God watching her from the cellar and smiling faintly.

I didn't hear what they were talking about when Grandma brought the stewed fruit. I was preoccupied by something quite different at the time. I crept stealthily under the raspberry bushes nearly to where the snakes were, not knowing where to go or what to do.

If only I could die here under the raspberry bushes, I thought. Let them look for me then, let them cry and grieve over me, recalling what a darling boy I had been. Let them carry me to the grave, and there I'd come to life again. But why at the graveside, when I could come to life even earlier? I'd jump to my feet and Grandma would run away in terror and never return, and then we'd go to the cottage to eat some *kolyvo**. I loved *kolyvo*. We had five boys and two girls in the family who had died. They died very young.

I wanted to get home. I sneaked along the wattle fence past the dunghill and the pumpkins, quietly entered the dark entrance hall and stopped before the door leading into the room.

Now I'll go in and see what'll happen.

The thought made me cold inside as if I had eaten too much mint. I opened the door.

Who had built our house and when, we did not know. To us it seemed that nobody had ever built it, that it had grown all by itself like a mushroom between the pear tree and the cellar, and it really did look like an old white mushroom. It was a very vivid house. There is one thing, though, we, or to be precise, Mother, did not like — the windows had sagged into the ground and there were no locks in the doors. Nothing in it was ever locked. So, please, come in, you're welcome! Mother complained that it was cramped, but for us kids there was enough space, and when you looked out of the windows you could see the sunflowers and the pear tree and the sun outdoors. On the white wall, under the icons and reaching right up to the dish rack, hung many beautiful pictures — the Pochaiv Lavra, the Kiev Lavra, and views of the Novy Afon and St. Simon of Canaan

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* *kolyvo* — a dish of wheat boiled with raisins, served after a funeral or mass for the dead

monasteries near the town of Sukhumi in the Caucasus. Floating over the monasteries were the figures of Virgin Marys and white angels looking like a flock of geese.

But the picture to beat all pictures was that of the Last Judgement, which Mother had got in exchange for a hen at the fair to strike fear in her great enemies — Grandma, Grandpa and Father. The picture was so fearful, yet at the same time so instructive that even Pirate was afraid to look at it. The upper part was dominated by Grandpa and all the Saints. In the middle the dead were crawling out of their graves — some up to Paradise, others down to hell. Across the whole picture in the middle and along the bottom was the twisted figure of a large blue adder. It was far thicker than the adders we used to kill among the pumpkins. And under the adder everything was aflame like during a big fire — that was hell. Sinful souls and devils burned there. At the very bottom of the picture, in separate squares, there was something like a pictorial register or list of punishments for the sins that had been committed. Those who had lied or mocked hung over a fire with a hook thrust through their tongues. Those who had not fasted were hooked by the belly. Those who furtively drank fat milk or fried eggs with lard during fasts were sitting with their bare bottoms on hot frying pans, and those who had sworn were licking the frying pans.

There were a lot of different sins and a lot of punishments, but for some reason or other nobody seemed to be afraid of them.

At first I simply shuddered at the very sight of this picture, but eventually I got used to it like a soldier in battle gets used to the thunder of guns.

Almost everyone in our family was a sinner: our means were meager, our hearts were ardent, there was hard work and discomforts galore; besides, there was our family passion for the sharp word, and although we at times dreamed about Paradise, we were more inclined to think we'd land in hell at the bottom of the picture. Here everyone had his place already set aside for him.

The devils were pouring hot tar down Father's throat for his drinking and beating up Mom. Grandma was

licking a hot frying pan because she had a venomous tongue and was a big-time sorceress. Grandpa (Mother swore that this was how it would be) was in the clutches of the Devil himself, because of his black magic and his reading of the magic Psalter every Sunday when he cast a spell on her, which made her feel ill for the third year running, and because when she secretly tore the black book to shreds and scattered them in the barn, the sheepfold, the pumpkin patch and under the raspberry bushes, they seemed to fly back into the leather cover all by themselves. Besides, long, long ago, Grandpa's deceased father Taras was regularly visited by a serpent, who came through the chimney at night and brought him money.

And, right enough, Grandpa with a full purse in his hands was in the clutches of the Devil in the right-hand corner of the picture. But, to tell the truth, he did not look much like our Grandpa, because he was naked as a jay bird and his beard was not white at all, but red from the scorching fire, while his hair stood on end and sizzled in the flames.

My elder brother Ovram had been condemned by Grandma a long time ago and ever since he had been flying headlong into hell from the upper left corner of the picture for having destroyed the pigeons' nests in the attic and stolen pork fat from the pantry during fasts. Besides that, Ovram's soul loved cream and he skimmed it from the milk pitchers stored in the cellar and pantry.

On the other hand, Mother swore she would be among the Saints in heaven as a suffering martyress who had fed her enemies — Grandpa and Grandma — and been good to them.

She prayed to St. George, whose steed trampled the serpent, and entreated him to drown her enemies — Father, Grandpa and Grandma — for ruining her life.

Mother swore by God that when she was still a young girl, St. George, clad in white vestments, riding a white horse and wielding a long spear, had visited her in her dreams, and when she started, moaning from fright, he had asked:

"Is that you, Odarka?"

"Yes."

"Don't be afraid, it's me, St. George. I've come to give you a sign. From now on, Odarka, you will be doing good to people on my behalf..."

Some ten or twenty years later Mother proclaimed herself a fortune-teller and started curing people from toothache, the evil eye and faintheartedness, although she herself was always ill.

"Take a look, that's where I am," she used to say, pointing at some holy soul near the Mother of God at the top of the Last Judgement picture. "Do you see?"

Mother had poked that pious soul so often, that instead of a face it now had a brown dot looking like a capital city on a geographical map. But later on Mother's affairs took on a turn for the worse. Once she did not give Grandma anything to eat for a long time, so Grand-

ma went and bought a lot of candles at the church and stood them upside down in front of God. After such damnation no one could have hope of reaching Paradise. From that time on Mother's health started to deteriorate, and at nights the hobgoblin choked her more frequently. He lived in the chimney of our house. They said that he never uttered a sound and looked like a black sheepskin coat turned inside out.

As a matter of fact, the only holy person in the whole household was myself. But now my holy status had lapsed. I shouldn't have pulled up the carrots. They should have gone on growing. So now I was a sinner. What was I to do?

When I entered the room, I sneaked up to the picture of the Last Judgement and stared with new eyes at the infernal punishments depicted at the bottom. I was afraid

to look at the top of the picture. I wasn't there any more.

What punishment, I wondered, had my newly sinful soul earned itself? Probably for the first sin it would not be too bad, maybe no worse than that ankle-high flame in the left corner of the picture. O-o-ouch...!

For the last time I looked up at the whole communion of Saints sitting together, and, distressed at being banished from their company and doomed to an eternity of hell, I could not restrain myself any longer and, leaning my head against hell just under Grandpa's purse, I began to sob bitterly.

The sight of the infernal punishments made my heels burn. I rushed on tiptoe through the entrance hall into the yard and toward the barn as if I were running across the frying pan Grandma was licking with her tongue. At that time the newspapers did not yet take an interest in my amoral deeds, although I remember very well that the world to which I belonged reacted vehemently to my desperate cry from the frying pan: the pigeons rose over the house with a flutter of wings, the hens clucked and the piglets squealed. The noise woke Pirate and he started to bark sleepily: "Who's making that fuss in the yard?" Presently the door squeaked ominously and Grandma appeared on the threshold of the dark pantry.

"Why are you howling, may you choke on a bone?! May you holler and never stop hollering!" And immediately appealing to the Mother of God above, she went on raving:

"Mother of God, Queen of Heaven, just as he does not let me have any peace, don't let him have any peace in this world or in the one to come!" Then she spied the pigeons in the sky and appealed to them:

"My little doves, my intercessors, make him blind to your holy feathers and deaf to your heavenly cooing! Don't let him ever become a tailor or a cobbler, a carpenter or a thresher..."

Then Grandma started to compose a song about me, singing it like a Christmas carol:

Don't ever let him be a plowman in the fi-i-ield,
or a mower in the mead,

God for-b-i-id.
Nor a mower in the mead, nor a merchant on the plain,
Nor a merchant on the plain or a fisherman on the main.

When the doves alighted on the thatch, she returned to her solemn prose:

"Holy doves and you, Mother of God, punish him with such work that he know no rest or sleep, and make him work, I beg of you, under such a boss..."

By this time my mind was too occupied with other things to be able to take in the detailed description of my future boss. I had to save myself before it was too late. I quickly crawled into an old boat that stood in the barn and began to rack my brains about how to restore my holiness.

That's when I decided for the first time in my life to do good things. I won't eat meat for a whole week, I decided. I'll carry as much water to Grandpa lying on the cellar as he wants and I'll start going to church. Looking at the swallows flying around me I decided I'd feed their fledglings flies and bread the moment they fell out of their nests, so that the swallows would see what good things I could do and fly and tell Jesus Christ about it.

But the baby swallows didn't fall out of their nests. They squeaked sorrowfully with beaks wide open, while their parents darted to and fro bringing them all kinds of insects to eat.

What good deed could I do now? I thought, giving up the swallows. I'll go out into the street and pay my respects to honored people. Grandpa used to say that this absolved many different sins in the world to come. I'll go and doff my hat and say "Hello" to those people.

The hat was lying right there in the boat. It was Grandpa's old hat. You won't see such hats now. They don't make them any more, and, besides, there are no such hat blocks today. It was heavy and looked very much like a copper kettle. And it was heavy as a good-sized kettle, believe me.

For a long time it had been lying in the entrance hall under the mortar. Our cat used to rear her kittens in it, but this year Grandma drowned them in a pond and the hat smelled of the kittens and not of Grandpa.

Since I had no other choice, I took the hat. The main thing was to have something to take off my head and show my respects. I put on the hat which slid right down to my mouth and went out into the street.

The street was empty. All the grownups were working in the field. Only near the store, on the porch across from the well sweep, Masiy the storekeeper was sitting in a black frockcoat which made him look remarkably like a swallow. But I didn't want to doff Grandpa's hat to Masiy. Grandpa used to say that instead of a soul Masiy had only steam, and that's why he cheated every customer. For this God had justly punished him, willing His burglars to steal ten rubles worth of goods from Masiy's store, after which his wife and children wailed for a long time and he himself bawled and called down cholera on everyone. Although Father poked fun at Masiy's clownishness, he pitied him and in times of ill luck helped him out, never touching him even when drunk.

Now where could I find a man to pay my respects to? After I had wandered through quite a few empty alleys in despair, it dawned on me that I should have started with our old neighbor Zakharko. He must surely be sitting near his house right now.

Old Zakharko was a blacksmith, although I had never seen him at his job. For all the years I could remember he had walked past our house with a whole bunch of fishing rods, stamping his boots so loudly that it was like being woken up by a thunderstorm at night, whenever he returned home. His boots were so large and his feet so heavy the ground seemed to give way under him. And he had a slightly bandy gait as if he were walking on hay. His beard, just like Grandpa's, was all white except for a daub of red around the mouth.

After fishing, old Zakharko would light himself a cigarette and sit for a long time on the log near his house, gazing at a point in space as if it were a float. He smoked such a strong brand of tobacco that no one could stand the smell of it. He was shunned by the hens and piglets. The dogs took to their heels at the sight of him, while his daughter-in-law Halka had to sleep in the pantry and often complained to Mother that the old

man's shag would suffocate her one day. She even threw his coat outside. It was said that Zakharko's shag even made the fish afraid of him and that's why they didn't bite. You could smell of Zakharko from afar. When he passed our house, the smell would linger over the street for a long time. One of these days it will find its way into my pictures about my native land in which my ancestor will place his calloused hands on a white shirt for the last time under the apple tree amid apples and pears, and the carrots will come to life in my pictures, and the sin, and Grandma's curses; but now I was heading off sadly to the old blacksmith to repent of my first sin.

"Hello, grandad!" I said, pulling off the hat with both hands, and quickly walked on.

There was no response. Old Zakharko did not notice me.

He probably did not hear me, I thought. I must go back and repeat my greeting louder this time.

"Hello, grandad!" I said again in a shaky voice, taking off that heavy hat and pricking up my ears to hear old Zakharko say something to absolve my sins the least little bit. But he did not utter a sound. What was I to do? Where was I to go?

I came out of the alley into the street, hoping to meet someone I could pay my respects to. But the street was empty. Even Masiy had disappeared somewhere. A tightness came to my throat, and on top of everything the heavy hat was making my neck ache. I stood there a while and again went to the old man in the hope of doing a good deed.

"Hello, grandad!" I said, stopping.

"Beat it, you little squirt. The devil knows why you're hanging around here annoying me!" the old man fumed.

These words made me jump with fright. My sufferings were boundless. In utter despair I rushed back home, having momentarily forgotten about the salvation of my sinful soul. I sneaked through the yard and into the barn and lay down again in the boat on Grandpa's sheepskin coat, wondering why I had been born into this world. I shouldn't have been born in the first place. Then I

decided to fall asleep and grow up while sleeping. Grandpa used to say that I was growing in my sleep.

Reasoning in this way, I wept a bit remembering the Last Judgement, then I looked at the swallows and, curling myself up, heaved a doleful sigh. What a tiny creature I must have looked lying there in Grandpa's boat, but what a lot of bad things had already happened to me. It was unpleasant when Grandma swore or when the rain poured for days on end. It was unpleasant when a leech stuck to your leg, when dogs barked at you, or when a gander hissed at your feet and pecked at your pants with its red beak. And how unpleasant it was to carry a pailful of water in one hand or to weed and prune the tobacco. It was unpleasant when Dad came home drunk and started to fight with Grandpa and Mother or smashed crockery. It was unpleasant to walk barefoot across the stubble or laugh in church when you couldn't help laughing. Or ride on a wagon packed with hay, when the wagon was about to slip down the river bank. It was unpleasant to look into a large fire, but it was pleasant to gaze into a small one. It was pleasant to hug a colt. Or to wake up at dawn and see in the room a calf that was born in the night. It was pleasant to splash through warm puddles after a storm, or to catch pike with your bare hands in muddy water, or to watch how a dragnet was pulled ashore. It was pleasant to find a bird's nest in the grass. It was pleasant to eat Easterbread and painted Easter eggs. It was pleasant to see our house flooded in spring, when everyone had to wade through the water, and it was pleasant to sleep in the boat, in the rye, in the millet, in the barley, and in all the other kinds of grain drying on the stove. And the smell of all the different grains was pleasant. It was pleasant to drag a sheaf to the stack and walk on the grain around the stacks. It was pleasant to discover that the apple you expected to be sour was actually sweet. It was pleasant to hear Grandpa yawn and the bells toll for vespers in summer. And there was yet another pleasant thing I liked very much — Grandpa talking to the horse and the colt as if they were people. I liked to hear someone say "Hello" passing our house in the evening and Grandpa replying "God be with you." I liked

to see the big fish jump on the lake or the Desna at sunset. I liked to look into the starry sky as I bumped home lying on a wagon. I liked to fall asleep in the wagon and be carried into the house when the wagon came to a halt in the yard. I liked to hear the wheels squeak under the heavy wagonloads at harvest time. I liked the birds' twittering in the orchard and the fields. I liked the swallows in the barn and the rails in the meadow. I liked the sound of water splashing in spring, and the frogs' gentle sorrowful croaking when the spring floods receded. I liked the girls singing Christmas carols, spring songs and harvest songs. I liked to hear the apples drop into the grass in the orchard at dusk. There was something mysterious and sad about the inevitability of nature's law in that dropping of fruit. Although Mother was afraid of thunder, I liked it — along with the rain and wind — for the gifts it brought to the garden.

But above everything else in the world I liked music. If I were asked what music I liked in early childhood, what instrument or musician, I would say that most of all I liked to listen to the sounds of a scythe being hammered. When on a quiet evening, some time before Sts. Peter and Paul's, our Father would start hammering the scythe near the house in the orchard, it sounded like the most entrancing music to me. Today I sometimes think that if someone were to hammer a scythe under my window I would immediately become younger, kinder, and would fall to work eagerly. The clear ring of the scythe betokened joy and delight to me — haymaking. I remember it from the earliest days.

"Hush, Sashko*, don't you cry," Grandpa would comfort me when I started to bawl for some reason or other. "Don't cry, you little fool. We'll hammer the scythe, go to a hayfield on the Desna, cut hay, catch fish, and make ourselves some gruel."

I'd quieten down, and then Grandpa would take me in his arms and tell me about the grass, about the mysterious lakes — Beak Bill Lake, Church Lake and Silent Lake, and about the Seim. His voice was kind, and his

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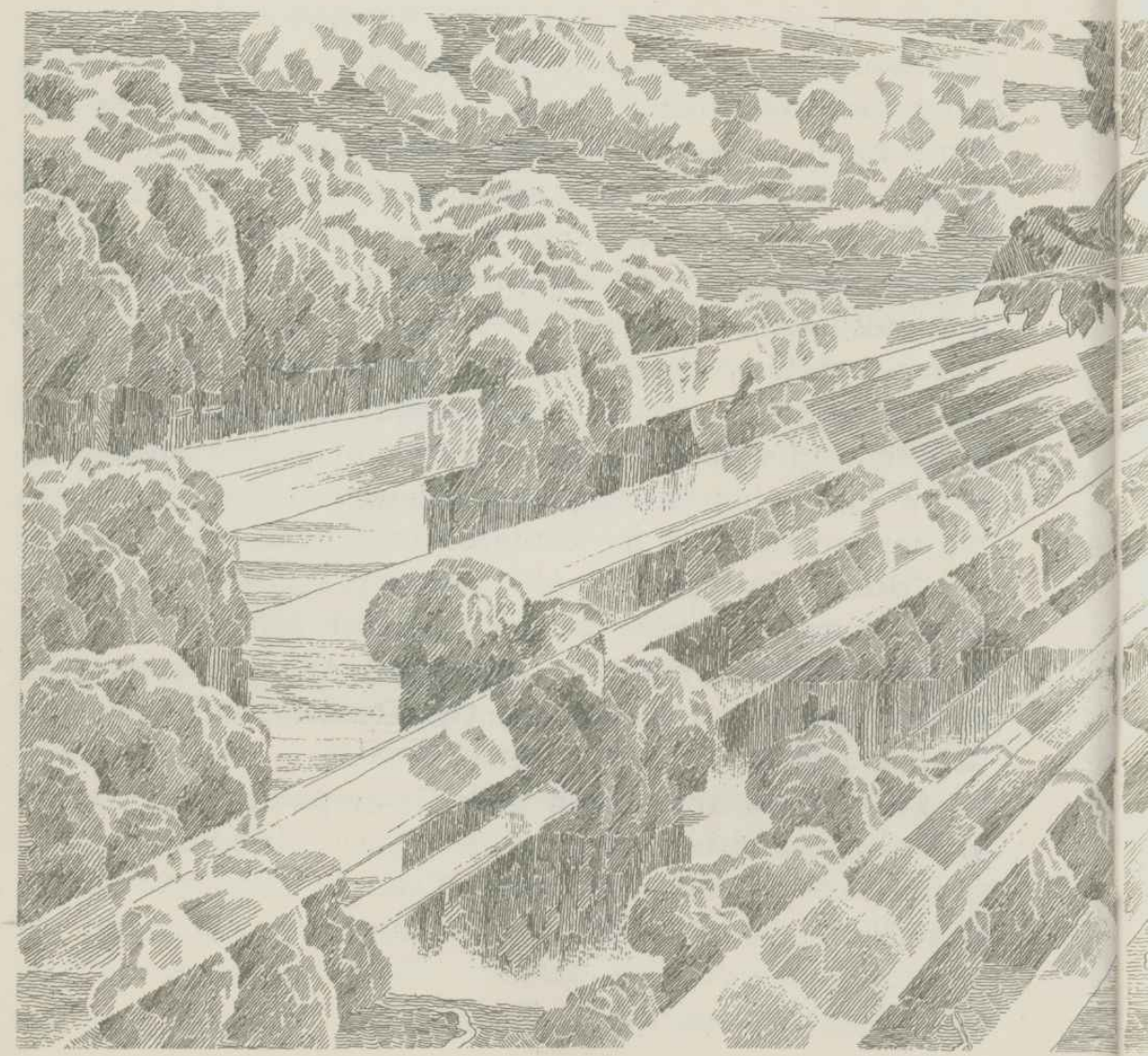
* Sashko — Ukrainian diminutive for Olexandr

eyes gentle, and his large knotty and hairy hands were so tender that you knew they had never done any wrong to anyone in this world, they had never stolen, never killed, and never spilled blood. They knew work and peace, generosity and goodness.

"We'll cut hay and make some gruel. So don't you cry, my little boy."

I'd calm down and feel myself floating into the air, to alight on the shores of Silent Lake, Church Lake and the Seim River. They were the most beautiful lakes and river in the world. There never was and never will be anything like them anywhere.

Well, dreaming in this way in the boat on Grandpa's sheepskin coat, I gradually closed my eyes. But in my mind there was no darkness. Even today, when I close my eyes, there is no darkness in my soul. My mind



shines on brightly, illuminating the visible and invisible in a boundless and, at times, disorderly sequence of pictures. The pictures flow by like the waters of the Danube and the Desna and their spring floods. Clouds float freely across the blue expanses of my mind, and on their way they get together and tussle in such numbers that if I were destined to harness but a thousandth part of them and arrange them in a coherent row of books or films I would know that I had not lived in this world for nothing and had not burdened my betters and audiences in vain.

If only I could describe the things I saw in the sky! It was a world teeming with giants and prophets locked in incessant battle which my childish soul did not always take lightly, sinking into sorrow.

Everywhere I looked I saw commotion and strife:

in the bark of oak and willow trees, in old tree stumps, in hollows, in marsh water, on pecked walls. Wherever I looked I would always discern the forms of men, horses, wolves, snakes and saints, something that looked like war, conflagration, fray or deluge. In my mind's eye everything lived a dual life. Everything called for comparison, everything was similar to something seen, imagined or experienced somewhere long ago.

But wait, what am I doing? I meant to write about the boat, and instead I am digressing about clouds. So back to the boat in the barn, to that little boat...

Dreaming in this way I eventually closed my eyes and felt myself grow. Presently, little by little, the boat started to rock under me and floated out of the barn into the orchard, through the grass between the trees and shrubs, past the cellar and lovage, past Grandpa. For some reason Grandpa became a small boy, smaller than me. He was sitting on Grandma's lap in a white shirt and smiling gently after me. The boat sailed on and on through the orchard, through the pasture to the meadow, and from there, past the farmsteads, to the Desna.

Strike up a tune, musicians, sing, ye angels in heaven, ye frogs along the banks, ye girls under the willow trees. I'm sailing down the river. I'm sailing down the river and overhead the world floats past me, the spring clouds race gaily through the sky, and beneath them fly the birds of passage — ducks, gulls, cranes. Storks fly by like sleeping men. Flotsam drifts down the river — pieces of willow, elm, poplar, and little islets of green.

Well, my dream in the boat was about something nice like this. I forget exactly. Or maybe I didn't have those dreams at all? Perhaps all that really did take place on the Desna? It did, believe me, but that was a very long time ago and the memories gradually got lost, and never ever will the innocence of my barefoot childhood return. And never again will the tobacco bloom like a pope's chasuble, and the Last Judgement of God will not scare me, because now even the judgement of man no longer has this power.

To do good things was the only desire which stayed with me to the last days of my life.

My day drew to a close, mist covered the clear field, and I peer around anxiously — I must hurry. The guests are sailing along in willow boats, the waves of the Desna chase each other, bringing me recurring thoughts of a distant warm land... What do you want? What do you really want?...

In my early childhood I was looked after by a total of four nurses. They were my four brothers: Lavrin, Serhiy, Vasil and Ivan. They were not destined to live in this world too long, because, as people said, they started singing early. The four of them would climb the wattle fence, settle down in a row like sparrows and launch into song. How they learned the songs I don't know, because nobody seemed to have taught them any.

When they died of an epidemic on one and the same day, people said that God had taken them away for his angels' choir. Indeed, they had filled their early years with songs, probably guessing they had not much time.

No wonder there were some tender female souls who could not listen to them unmoved. The women looked at them and, sorrowfully shaking their heads, crossed themselves and even burst into tears not knowing why: "Oh dear me, there's nothing good in store for these children."

It was on Whitsunday, so people said, that tragedy visited our white cottage. I was then just going on two.

When Father found out at the fair in Borzna that his children were dying of some unknown disease, he hurriedly hitched up the horses. His mad dash along those thirty *versts* *, mercilessly lashing the horses to save as much time as possible, shouting for the ferryman on the Desna and then tearing off — all this was the subject of talk for a long time thereafter. On reaching the house the sweat-drenched horses fell against the gate breaking it down before collapsing in a bloody lather. Father ran up to the children, but they were already dead, only I was alive. What could he do? Beat up Mother? She was more dead than alive herself. Father cried bitterly over us:

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* *verst* — unit of distance equal to 0.6629 miles

"Oh, my sons, my sons! My little nightingales...! Why was your song cut short so early?..."

Then he called us his baby eagles, and Mother called us her little nightingales. And the people wept and pitied us for a long time, because we would never become mowers in the mead nor plowmen in the field, nor gallant soldiers.

What could the intensity of Father's grief be compared to? Unless perhaps the darkness of night. In his great despair he damned the name of God, and God had to keep silent. Had He appeared before him in all His glory, Father would probably have pounced on Him and run Him through with a pitchfork or hacked Him down with an ax.

He chased the pope out of the yard and declared he would bury his children himself.

A similar outburst of despair and wrath, but this time directed not at God but at us people, came over him on the banks of the Dnieper fifty years later, when he wept for the second time on the abandoned Kiev hills, reproaching each and every one of us. Whether the old man, enslaved then by the nazi invaders, was right or wrong is not for us to judge. For it has long been known that suffering is measured not so much by the pressure of circumstances as by the depth of emotional shock. Who of us has not been shocked by life?

I have seen many handsome people in my lifetime, but none as handsome as Father. He had dark hair, a large head and large wise gray eyes. But for some reason they were always filled with gloom: the mark of illiteracy and lack of freedom. Yet somehow within the gloom that encircled him his spirit survived.

It was hard to imagine how much earth he plowed, or how much grain he reaped! He was a man of great dexterity, strength and purity. He had white skin without a single blemish, glistening wavy hair, and broad generous hands. How gracefully he lifted the spoon to his mouth, supporting it with a slice of bread lest he soil the homespun canvas spread on the grassy bank of the Desna. He loved a good joke and a polished phrase. He knew how to be tactful and deferential. He loathed the authorities and the Czar. The Czar insulted his dignity because of his red goatee, flimsy stature, and petty rank which was supposedly lower than a general's.

The only unattractive thing about Father was his clothes. They were so unsightly, faded and poor! It was as if some brutes, just for the sake of insulting the image of man, had covered an antique statue with dirt and rags. At times when he would stagger home from the tavern, gazing at the ground in dejection, I was on the verge of bursting into tears as I looked at him from my hideout in the raspberry bushes with Pirate. Nonetheless, he was always handsome and there was a verve in him, whether he sowed or reaped, hollered at Mother or Grandpa, smiled at the children, beat the horse, or when he himself was beaten by the nazi police. And when, as an eighty-year-old man abandoned by everyone, he roamed homeless through the squares under fascist slavery and people, taking him for a beggar, handed him kopecks, he was still handsome.

You could use him as a model to draw knights, Gods, Apostles, great scientists and enlighteners — he had the right features for all of these. Much bread did he grow, many people did he feed and save from the flood, and much land did he plow before he became free from his gloom.

In fulfilment of the eternal law of life I, having bowed my bared gray head and sanctified my thoughts with silence, turn to him and beseech him to spell out his last wish to me. There he stands before me on the Kiev hills far away. His beautiful face has turned blue from the nazis' beating. His hands and feet have swollen, grief has misted his eyes with tears, and his

voice is already failing. I can barely hear his words of long ago: "My children, my little nightingales..."

One night two events took place in our cottage which, as you already know, was embedded to window level in the ground.

Waking up in the morning on the *pich* where I had been sleeping in the rye — oh no, I'm wrong, it was barley — well anyway, waking up in the warm fragrant grain, I heard strange things happening in the house, as if I were in a fairy tale: Grandpa was crying, Mother was crying, the hen was clucking in the entrance hall, and there was a churchlike smell in the air. Outside Pirate was barking fiercely at some beggars. Presently I heard them shuffling in the entrance hall and running their fingers over the door in search of the latch. I opened my eyes and had barely woken up when Mother came up to the *pich,* holding out a trough for me to see, in which there was a child swathed in white diapers like in a picture.

"Have you woken up already, sonny? I've brought you a baby doll, a girl. Here, take a look!"

I looked at the doll. For some reason I took an instant dislike for her. She even scared me a bit with her face as small as a fist and blue like a baked apple.

"What a beauty, what a love!" Mother said gently and tenderly. "Look at her yawning. My little gray turtledove, my tiny flower..."

Mother's happy face beamed with joy, yet there were traces of tears on it. We all knew that Mother was a whiner, but what was making her cry now? I wondered.

"What happened, Mom?"

"I'm crying for Grandpa's sake so that he won't feel offended," she whispered happily in my ear. "You know what a miracle happened to us?"

"What miracle?"

"Oh, that's the end of my poor orphan's soul!" I heard Grandpa exclaim in despair, after which he burst into such a fit of coughing that the whitewash started flaking off the ceiling. But the sounds of trilling pipes and crowing roosters, which came from Grandpa's chest, concealed a note of despair and grief. I sat up in a flash and

peeped out from behind the *pich:* gosh! Great-grandmother was lying on the table under the icons. With hands folded on her chest she had a peculiar suggestion of a smile on her face, which seemed to say that from now on nobody could tease and reproach her for staying too long in this world. Having had her fill of running around barefoot and stubbing her toes for a hundred odd years, she was now lying quietly with her head toward the Kings and Knights of Heaven and the Last Judgement. Her all-seeing eyes had closed, her passionate folk creativity had lapsed into silence, and all her curses seemed to have escaped from the house together with her soul. Oh, if you could only realize how it feels to see great-grandmothers pass away, all the more so in winter and in old houses! What a relief it is. The house immediately grows larger, the air becomes clean and bright as if in Paradise. I quickly got down onto the ingle, from there I jumped into Grandpa's felt boots and ran headlong outdoors past the beggars. The sun was shining. The doves were flying overhead with no one to curse them. Pirate was merrily romping with the chain and wire. A cock crowed on the tattered thatch. The geese and the boar were eating together from a trough in perfect harmony. Sparrows chirped. Father was planing the coffin. The snow was melting. Water was dripping from the thatch. I climbed a high pile of willow branches and started to rock up and down, up and down. In the street old Zakharko appeared with pails on his way to get some water; the old smith Zakharko was coming, old Zakharko was coming.

"Hey, grandad, want to hear some news? Our Grandma's dead, honest she is!" I shouted happily and started to laugh.

"Why, you little brat!" Zakharko said angrily. "What's so funny about that? Just you wait and I'll show you! Hey, what's the idea!..."

Presently our red steer Mina appeared out of nowhere. He was given to butting because his little horns were itching, and on this particular morning the dung had frozen to his sides, tickling his belly. So he pushed open the gate with his itching horns and rushed headlong toward old Zakharko. The man started to curse at the

damned beast and with a shriek "Help, he's tearing up my guts!" he fell into a puddle. When our loyal dog Pirate saw how Mina was laying into the old smith to the accompaniment of the rattle of pails, the cackle of hens, Father's swishing plane, and the water dripping from the thatch, he let out a loud bark. The ducks started quacking and the geese gaggling, the hens scattered in fright, and the sparrows flew away in all directions. That damned Pirate, forgetting that he was chained, jumped in the air and took after Mina, pulling at his wire with such force that it snapped with a loud twang.

For a moment all was quiet in the yard. The pigeons rose into the sky like harbingers of peace and grace. I was dizzy with joy and laughed so much that I find it difficult to write about it calmly. So as not to be accused of lapsing into symbolism and biologism from childhood on, I'd better switch over to everyday prose, the more so since it's coming of its own.

From the right and left of the draw well behind the barn another group of beggars was heading my way like a flock of cranes. Having probably caught the scent of Grandma's departed soul, they turned as one man from the highway into our street and at once started to sing:

When the wo-o-orms fall on your fle-e-sh,
And the earth swallows up your bo-o-ones,
Neither friends nor brethren will save your so-u-uls,
But only the alms you give to the po-o-or!

They had large bags hanging from their shoulders. With raised wall-eyed faces which seemed to smile into the sky they sang their creepy song, holding on to each other and to their long staffs. It was on them that Pirate vented all his anger, barking at them shrilly. He hated beggars, and, anyway, he wanted to please his master who also hated them. But careless Pirate forgot about the cunning tricks of the blind beggars, and soon paid for his boldness.

"Yelp!" Pirate squealed plaintively as the beggars' leader Bohdan Kholod brought down his staff on the creature's back.

There are no such beggars any more. And there are no such songs and beggars' bags. There's no blindness, nor such wild wall-eyed faces and cripples and hunchbacks. They've all disappeared together with the *kurkuls* *.

Mother feared and loathed beggars, although she always gave generously to them. She was a proud woman and was very anxious that the beggars think her well-to-do.

The beggars had filled the whole yard. Bohdan Kholod, their strong elderly leader, did not like to go begging from door to door. He disliked both people and dogs, and it was questionable whether he was blind at all. His eyes were fixed on the ground all the time and his expression was always so glowering that it was doubtful whether he saw anything else but the ground under his feet. He looked so hideous that wherever he appeared people locked themselves up and silence reigned in the houses till he was far away. That is why he almost never went around begging, but collected his tribute sitting on the corner near the market. He did not beg for alms, he demanded them. His thunderous angry voice did not suit for begging.

"Give me something! A kopeck or a roll! Or an apple!" he shouted in his ominous hoarse bass full of discontent and spite. "Come on, people, be so kind as to give me something. Give me some little thing at least!..." When no one responded to his pleas for a long time, he'd knock the ground angrily with his staff. "Bah! May fortune never come your way, may the wolves tear you to pieces. Giv-i-ive!!!"

Once, when he was angrily thumping the ground with his staff, he nearly frightened to death the daughter of the police superintendent Konashevich as she was dreamily heading for a date with a beau.

"Dear me!" screamed the girl and jumped aside. "Help!"

"Gi-i-i-ive!"

Next day the policeman Ovramenko lowered the status of the old beggar by forbidding him to sit near

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* *kurkul* — Ukrainian equivalent for kulak — a prosperous or wealthy peasant living off the sweat of others

the market. Kholod took up a new position in a desolate suburb under an old barn roof where the pitiless children of the townsfolk gradually sapped his mettle.

"Serves him right, that old devil. At least he won't be scaring people any more," our Father said, spitting on the ground with contempt. "He's not a beggar, damn him, more like an oak tree struck by a thunderbolt."

Father treated Kholod with disrespect, though he didn't really know why. Maybe it was because of the man's vigor which he had squandered or because of his husky voice which always put Father in a melancholy mood. Generally, Father abhorred misery so much that he never used the word "poverty" when talking about himself. Instead of saying "my poverty" he'd say "my wealth" as, for instance: "I beg your pardon, but my wealth does not permit me to buy a new pair of boots."

Of all the beggars Father only acknowledged one — Kulik. And although Kulik, who wore a light overcoat and large boots which seemed resistant to any wear and tear, looked outwardly better off than Father, my old man always lavished alms on him and never abused him. Father respected art, and Kulik roamed about with a *bandura* *, singing about things far from the divine. Father respected Kulik for his artistic looks. Although Father looked like a poorly dressed actor from an Imperial theater, he had no gift for singing. Once in a while when he and his neighbor Mikola Troihub got drunk they tried to sing their one and only barge haulers' song reminding them of their past journeys on the Don and in the Zaporizhian steppes around Kakhovka:

The sacks are so heavy they rub my shoulders raw, ugh!
Myself I'd better hire out barges to draw, yeah!
Myself I'd better hire out... y-eah! barges to draw
For a shot of vodka-a-a...

Further than that the song would not go. They dragged it like some heavy bark against the current, but the chorus fell apart and faded away in a cadence of dischords. Then the singers would stop waving their

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* *bandura* — a Ukrainian stringed instrument of the lute class

hands in time with the music and lapse into silence, moodily pondering their vocal ineptitude; still in silence, they would knock back a drink accompanied by some small comment and a heavy sigh: "Oh-h well!..."

Now, what was I talking about before that? Oh yes, the beggars.

As I was saying, the old smith Zakharko was screaming in the puddle. Mina wanted to tear out his guts. The pigeons were flying overhead. Water was dripping from the thatch. The beggars were singing about infernal torments, and Pirate was going wild. On a dunghill a cock was crushing a hen. The sparrows were sitting on the barn. And I was rocking on the wet willow branches, coughing loudly and laughing happily: I sensed spring in the air. I felt marvelous. The air smelled of dung, wet snow and damp willow branches.

"Father, the steer is trampling the old man!"

"Where?"

"In the puddle!" I cried simultaneously with the cock.

We lived, to a certain extent, in harmony with nature. In winter we froze, in summer we roasted in the sun, in autumn we kneaded the mud with our feet, while in spring we were inundated by the flood. He who has not experienced all this does not know what joy and real living is. Spring came to us from the Desna River. In those days nobody knew anything about taming nature, and the water flowed wherever and however it chose. At times the Desna overflowed so grandly that it swallowed up not only forests and hayfields but also whole villages screaming for help. That brought us glory.

I could fill a book with the exploits of Father, Grandpa and me in rescuing people, cows and horses. Those were my preschool heroics for which I would probably win a holiday in the Artek* today. But in those days we didn't know anything about any Arteks. It was a long time ago. I forget what year it was that spring, on Easter's eve, when the flood grew so big that no one, neither my Grandpa nor even Grandpa's mother, had ever seen anything like it.

The water was rising with tremendous speed. In one

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* Artek — international children's camp in the Crimea

day all the forests, hayfields and gardens were flooded. At sunset a storm broke out. It raged over the Desna throughout the whole night. Bells tolled. Somewhere far away in the dark people shouted, dogs yelped plaintively, and the storm roared in wild abandon. Nobody went to bed. What could be done?

So the police superintendent sent the sturdy policeman Makar to Father.

"You must save the people in Zahrebellya. They're drowning, didn't you hear about it?" he ordered Father in a hoarse voice. "You've got the only sound boat in the whole province, and you're a sailor besides."

Hearing this calamity, Mother immediately burst into tears:

"How can he, it's Holy Easter!"

Father shut Mother up sharply and said to Makar:

"Look, I'd be delighted to rescue people, but I'm afraid I'd be committing a sin. At daybreak it'll be Easter Sunday and I must eat a slice of sanctified Easter-bread and have a drink according to custom. I haven't had a drink for the last two months. I can't disrespect Easter."

"Mind, you'll land in jail," said Makar as he sniffed the air redolent of a roasted suckling pig. "Instead of getting a laudation for saving people and cattle you'll be cracking fleas in a clink."

"All right," Father gave up. "Hang it, I'm coming."

Mother, who was always a bit over-excited on Easter eve, exclaimed in despair:

"Now, where are you off to? You can't go anywhere without eating some Easter-bread."

"All right, let's eat it unsanctified. If we sin, we sin. Makar, sit down. Christ has risen!... Fill up! Here's to spring, to the Easter willow, to the flood and the calamity to boot!"

So, having broken fast, we set off one by one, missing High Mass. Making our way with great difficulty, we reached the flooded village of Zahrebellya only by daybreak. All the villagers were perched on the thatched roofs with their unsanctified Easter-breads. The sun rose. It was an unusual scene, like a dream or a fairy tale. In the sunlight a completely new world unfolded before

us. Everything was different, everything was more beautiful, grander and merrier. The water, the clouds, the driftwood — everything was swimming, everything was restlessly surging ahead, foaming and glistening under the sun.

Beautiful spring!

We rowed with all our might under the wise direction of Father. We were satisfied after our work. Father — merry and strong — was sitting with an oar in the stern. He was a savior from the flood, a hero-seafarer, a Vasco da Gama. And although by a twist of fate he was destined to live near a puddle instead of an ocean, his soul was like that of an ocean. That's precisely why our Vasco da Gama, whose soul was big enough to encompass the whole ocean, could not entirely come to terms with this discrepancy and sunk his ships in a tavern. They say that to a drunkard the sea is only knee-deep. Oh no, that's a lie. It took me a long time to understand that. Father sunk his ships in the hope that some time in the dirty tavern the little puddle of his life would turn, for an hour at least, into a fathomless and boundless ocean.

The water was rising with incredible fury. No sooner did the villagers come to their senses than their homes became islands disappearing under the water.

"He-e-lp!"

The frothing current swept through the streets and meadows and hissed around the walls and doors, flooding stables, sheepfolds and barns. Then, suddenly rising three yards more, it rushed into the houses through the doors and windows.

"He-e-lp, for God's sake!"

The houses shook under the current. The cattle lowed and brayed in the hurdlings. Frightened horses stood numb at their hitchposts up to their necks in water; the pigs had already drowned. From the neighboring villages along the Desna the flood waters bore down drowned, bloated oxen. The water reached the church and rose right up to the iconostasis. The whole village was flooded. Only Yarema Bobir, a relative of ours on Grandpa's side, escaped the disaster. He knew the symptoms of all natural phenomena and had special trust in the behavior

of mice. He knew about the flood well in advance, in winter. When on the feast of the Epiphany he saw mice running out of the barn and pantry across the snow, our sly uncle at once guessed that calamity would strike in spring. However much his foolish and unwary neighbors made fun of him he silently stripped the thatch over the entrance hall, built a hurdling on the roof with a stairway leading to it, and filled the whole attic with a good supply of hay and grain. So when the village, instead of "Christ is risen," desperately hollered "Help!", the large Bobir family were happily breaking the fast sitting on their rooftop manger surrounded by cows, horses, sheep, hens and doves just like in the old picture I saw hanging in church.

"Help! Our house is being swept away!" someone shouted from below.

"Christ is risen!"

At this point Christ heard things being hollered across the water, which would have made the most case-hardened jury blush. Besides, someone had spread the provocative rumor that the pope's wife had eaten meat during Lent, which she had taken in plenty from the pope's closed retail stock. There was a great outcry. On second thoughts, however, this talk was not anti-religious or blasphemous. Sitting on the thatch with their unsanctified Easter-breads amid the drowned cattle, the believers probably wanted God to be a little more considerate to the world He had created. To put it more simply, they wanted from God, God's Mother and the Saints something better than these oppressive and untimely discomforts.

"What the hell kind of Easter-bread is this if, God forbid, it has to be eaten unsanctified. The entire parish is huddling on roofs, while the catfish swim freely around in our houses."

"Christ is risen, you drowned ducks!" Father shouted merrily as his boat skimmed over the wattle fence into the yard and hit the thatch.

"Oh, cursed be the hour," an elderly man, Lev Kiyanitsya, responded from the thatch and handed Father a full glass of *horilka*. "He has risen indeed. Now help us, Petro, and don't you take it so lightheartedly. Any min-

ute the house might be swept away. See, it's already moving."

"For God's sake, help. For Go-o-od's sake!" the womenfolk screamed.

"Easter day be blessed, ye people! Easter of God the Lord, from death to life and from earth to heaven..."

"Help! We're drowning!..."

Presently a little boat bobbed out from behind the houses, bearing the pope Kirilo, the sexton Yakim and the cantor Luka who acted as helmsman. The dignitaries of the church had been busily sailing from house to house, sanctifying the Easter-breads to boost the religious morale of their parishioners.

"Father Kirilo, come here! The children are crying for a piece of Easter-bread!"

"Have patience, Christians!" Father Kirilo shouted

back. "The Almighty has sent us a sign through these waters which are blessed tidings of a good harvest of crops and grasses. Where are you steering, you devil! Steer toward the thatch, toward the thatch or I'll fall out the boat!"

Somehow the cantor propelled the boat to the thatch. The clerics sprinkled the Easter-bread and Easter eggs with the blessed spring water and in the process downed a drink too much, until they started forgetting what song was best fit for the occasion.

"Father, I think a nice jolly tune would fit the occasion much better," my father joked.

"That's not funny at all," snapped the pope angrily. He disliked my father for being handsome and irreverent. "Even today you're against God, you impious infidel."

"Father, and you sexton, and you cantor, let's get it straight about my religious creed: I am not against God," my father said merrily as he pulled in a half-drowned heifer with a rope. "Sashko, grab her by the horns. Hold on, don't be afraid. I'll pull the rope under her belly now... So listen, you clerics, I'm not against God, I'm not against Easter and not even against Lent. I'm not against His ox and His ass or against His cattle... And if at times I anger His omnipotent, all-wise and all-seeing eye, that doesn't mean I don't believe in Him or believe in some other God!"

"You'll burn in hell for such words!" the sexton interceded on God's behalf.

"I don't care," said Father, and, heaving the heifer up with a pole, he deftly hauled it into the boat. "Where else should a sinner such as I burn, as you say yourself. Of course, God above knows best what's what when it comes to unleashing fires or floods on His people, or mice or a drought, or wicked men in power, or a war for that matter. On the other hand, though, I, as God's creation, have my own interests and my own common sense which may not be great but doesn't seem to me to be wicked or foolish. Seriously, what should I be praising my Lord for, and especially on Easter, when He sends us such a flood? I don't know what God's planning with all this water. But personally I don't see any sense in it."

"The ways of God are unfathomable," Father Kirilo said sternly.

"Oh aye, of course," my father agreed, taking an expert look around the flooded landscape. "There must have been a great divine purpose in such a gift of water, but the only thing I know for sure is that my pants are wet and my head doesn't seem to get any drier."

"Be quiet, you blasphemer!" Father Kirilo shouted angrily, and just then it all happened. Having lost his balance, the pope began beating the air with his hands and fell headlong into the water. No sooner did that happen than the boat swayed in the opposite direction and only the ripples on the water indicated the place where the sexton and the cantor had disappeared.

There followed a tremendous roar from the thatched

roofs of the flooded village — both young and old laughed until they sobbed and hiccupped. How do you like that? Laughing at the act of sanctifying Easter-bread, and at themselves and at the whole world on Easter! And what a place to do it! On thatched roofs amid horses and cows, the heads and horns of which barely showed above the water. No, the national character of the Zahrebellya villagers had not risen to the level of comprehending the conventions and conformities of natural calamities. That national character tempted them to make fun even of Holy Easter. My father, a great and kind man, could not suppress a smile as he looked at these people.

"What a parish! Every spring for over a thousand years they've been getting soaked like this, and the devil can't budge them from this place. It's a trick of nature, I guess."

Hooking the oar handle into Father Kirilo's golden chain, my father pulled him out of the water into his ark like a catfish to join the cows and sheep. Then we proceeded to pull out the sexton and had such rib-tickling fun that we forgot about the cantor Luka. I don't remember exactly what happened to him; seems like he was devoured by crawfish in the end. So much for the flood.

Our village vanished from the face of the earth not by flood, but by fire. It happened in spring as well, half a century later. The village went up in flames, because it had helped the partisans, and those of its residents whom the nazis failed to massacre right away jumped into the river with their clothes aflame.

The church, filled with screaming people, was burned down. The high flames blazed throughout the whole night, crackling and bursting in dull explosions, and large fiery bundles of straw, like the souls of dead mothers, were scattered by the wind into the black void of the sky. The nazis chased the women through the streets and gardens, snatched their children away and threw them into the burning houses. The mothers, unwilling to live, to see, to weep, to curse any more, rushed after their children and burned to death in the flames of the nazis' inferno.

The hanged looked into the sky from the menacing

gallows, dangling on the ropes and casting their dreadful shadows on the ground and the river. Everyone who did not escape into the forest, the marshes or the partisan enclaves — perished. The beautiful village was no more. The cottages, the orchards, the kind merry people were gone. Only the skeletons of stoves looked white above the ashes.

I, too, burned in the fire at that time, dying all the deaths of humans, animals and plants: I was ablaze like a tree or a church, I swayed on the gallows and was reduced to ashes and smoke by the catastrophic explosions. From my muscles and shattered bones they made soap in the middle of the twentieth century. My skin went to make book covers and lamp shades and was flattened by heavy tanks on the paths of war. Once I felt I could bear it no longer and, while shouting battle slogans from the flames and crying vengeance on the enemy, I moaned: "It hurts me, it hurts!"

"Why did you cry?" I was reproached. "What made you do that in such a great hour of trial? Was it pain or fear?"

"It was suffering," I replied. "Excuse me, but I'm an artist, and imagination has always been my joy and my curse. All of a sudden it betrayed me. At the sight of this devastation it seemed to me for a fleeting moment that not only my village was perishing, but all my people. What could be more terrible than that?!"

From that time on I used to comfort myself with the fanciful notion that human faultlessness is to a large extent the result of sheer chance rather than conscious virtue.

And I was wrong, of course. One should never forget one's vocation, never forget that the people need artists to show them the beauty of life, to fill them with the realization that life itself is the greatest of all imaginable blessings. It's a strange and pitiful thing that we sometimes lack the power and clarity of spirit to fathom life's daily happiness, which is variable in its constant drama and joy, and that therefore so much beauty passes before our eyes unnoticed.

But let us again board our willow boat. Let us take the ash-wood oars and return to the Desna, to the surging

flood of that year when Father and I rescued people at Easter time.

As far as I remember, the spring flood did not subside for a long time. By the fourth Wednesday after Easter it still covered a large portion of the meadows and valleys, and that's why the mowing season started late that summer.

Our preparations for mowing were always a long drawn-out affair. At sunset we would still not be ready. There'd be fussing, cross words, Mother would argue with someone or other, and on seeing me preparing to leave she'd exclaim:

"Oh no, look, he's already on the wagon! Now, you're not to take the boy along! The mosquitoes will bleed him to death!"

"They won't, he'll be all right," Father said angrily.

"He'll drown in the Desna, believe me!"

"I won't drown, Mom!"

"You silly boy, you'll fall off a cliff!"

"But Mom, why should I fall off a cliff?" I was on the verge of tears.

"Then you'll cut yourself with a scythe. Now promise that you won't go messing around near the scythes?"

"No, I won't! I swear to God I won't!"

"I don't trust you an inch! Sashko, stay at home," Mother implored. "It's so scary in the shrubs there."

"It's not at all, Mom."

"There're holes in the lakes!"

"I won't go near them."

"There're snakes in those forests!"

"Oh Mom, come on!"

"Don't go, sonny. Don't let him go!"

Lucky enough for me Mother's pleas went unheeded. Father inspected the wagon for the last time.

"Have we got everything we need?"

Yes, we had: potatoes, onions, cucumbers, bread, a kettle, a large wooden bowl, a dragnet, canvas cover, mowing implements, rakes — everything was in the wagon.

The gates were opened, Mother crossed herself, mumbling something under her breath, the horses leaned into their collars — and off we went.

I didn't turn round. Standing near the cottage Mother repeatedly called farewell to me. Many, many times Mother would see me off, looking down the road through tear-misted eyes, making the sign of the cross at my retreating figure, and praying under the morning and evening stars that I might be shielded from bullet, sword, or cruel slander.

I made many such departures, hurrying into the unknown. The farewells eventually found their way into my films, and the separations wove their nests in my heart. Someone sets off into the unknown, leaving behind someone tearful and sad. But I did not know yet anything about that.

I was lying on the wagon, surrounded by the backs of Father, Grandpa, and the mowers. I was on my way to a kingdom of grass, rivers and enchanted lakes. Our wagon was made entirely of wood: our grandfather and great-grandfather had been *chumaks* and they did not like iron, for, so they said, it attracted thunderbolts. The road to the Desna was about five *versts* long and very uneven. First you had to pass through two large marshes with waterlogged woods which never seemed to dry up, then came two bridges, another marsh, followed by two small villages where there were fierce dogs, then the route ran through the narrow winding streets of the village of Male Ustye, further on you had to drive along steep river banks always on guard lest the wagon overturn into the water, then you turned right and went at full speed downhill to cross a little ford, further on it went uphill and again uphill and downhill, after which there was a turn to the right and yet another one, and again along the river between aspen and oak trees, and at last by the very banks of the Desna there was my kingdom.

Along the route the mowers exchanged small talk, jumped off the wagon when it approached a mire or rolled uphill, then they would climb in and I would again see their large backs around me, and above their backs their scythes, which they held like soldiers their weapons, and the stars and crescent shone on me from the high dark sky.

There was a smell of cucumbers in the air, of fish

net, bread, of Father and the mowers, of marshes and grass; from afar came the call of landrails and quails. The wagon silently creaked beneath me, and in the dark-blue sky the Galaxy pointed the way. As I gazed at the sky and kept turning with the wagon and the mowers to right and left, the starry universe moved in time with us, and, blissfully happy, I gradually drifted off into slumber.

I woke up lying under an oak tree near the Desna. The sun was high in the sky, the mowers were far away swinging their ringing scythes, the horses grazed. There was a smell of flowers and withered grass. What a beautiful scene. The willows, banks, hills and forest — everything was glittering and shining in the sun. I jumped from the high bank onto the sandy beach. I drank some water from the river. It was mild and sweet. Wading into the water up to my knees and craning my neck like a horse, I took another drink; then I jumped up the high bank and ran off into the hayfield. I had a feeling I wasn't treading on land, but flying, barely touching the meadow with my feet. I ran into the forest — it was full of mushrooms, the willow grove overflowed with blackberries and the shrubs with nuts. The lake came alive with fish the moment I stepped into it.

I stayed in this paradise for two or three days till the mowing was finished. During my stay I carried wood to the camp, built the fire, peeled potatoes, and gathered blackberries for the mowers to make brandy with. After the mowing we all raked in the hay, but then our enchanted world began to change little by little. Father, Grandpa and Uncle became anxious and taciturn, eyeing each other suspiciously as they divided out the hay ricks.

We had a collective hayfield. It was impossible to divide it because every one was afraid that he'd get landed with the third part which stretched along the bend of the Desna and got relentlessly cut off by the spring flood every year. That's why we did our haymaking in a group. After the ricks had been divided each of the three piled them up in stacks at their camps. For some reason the sharing out of the ricks almost

always ended in a brawl. Either Father or Uncle would think they were one rick out, they would become full of resentment, and angry words would be exchanged ending in an all-out fight on the shores of the enchanted Desna.

They fought with long poles, rake and pitchfork handles, clutching them with both hands like ancient warriors. At times they would chase each other with axes, shouting so loudly and fearsomely that their voices echoed across the Desna, the forest and the quiet haunting lakes. Then we, children, that is me, my brother and Samiylo's boys, would also start hating each other and get ready to take the field, but we were afraid to. We lacked the years and experience of misery to make our hatred complete. Besides, we were very anxious not to break up our fishing partnership.

So we turned away and did not look at our young adversaries.

Only the horses did not take part in the hostilities. They grazed together, all of them equally lean and shabby with large sores on their galled backs. Their heads bobbed up and down as they looked indifferently at us and flicked away the bothersome gadflies.

In these battles it was my Grandpa who displayed the most valor. It's over a half century now since he departed this world, but as long as I live I'll never forget the martial passion harbored by his kind heart.

He could work himself up to a pitch of passion that the world's greatest actor or general would envy.

During the fight his whole being would bubble with rage. The pipe band which whistled and squeaked within his panting chest would be drowned by his frenzied war cry: "Siberia is our Czar's!"

Uttering this mighty war cry, he would rush into the assault like a real *Otaman* of the hayfield until pain forced him to the ground under a rick, where he would roll on his back with feet and toes curled up, clutching his side and pushing in his cursed hernia as if it were an evil spirit trying to break loose. Then, after subduing this spirit, he would grab a pitchfork or an ax and throw himself again into the thick of battle. The invader Samiylo could not stand up to Grandpa's assault and

would take to his heels. They would run between the oaks and ricks, but Samiylo could never give Grandpa the slip. He would stumble, and, completely windless by now, break out yelling, "Help!" Grandpa would already be swinging his ax over Samiylo's head... At this point I'd be unable to look at the scene any longer and closed my eyes, imagining them chopping each other up like wood. In my mind's eye I could see the blood flowing in streams as they chopped off each other's heads and hands and hacked at each other's chests in fiery hatred, and, as I said, rivers of blood would flow. Now they would break, now they would pounce on each other with big wooden pitchforks, yelling:

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"I'll kill you...!"

"I'll run you through!"

"Help!"

"Ah-h-h!"

The infuriated Samiylo fell on Grandpa and pierced him with an enormous pitchfork, pinning him to the stubble like St. George the dragon. Grandpa uttered such a terrible shriek of pain that even the oak leaves trembled, and the echo was so loud that all the frogs jumped into the lakes and a crow, who will come into the story later, flew up over the forest. But Grandpa somehow managed to swing his ax from below and brought it down of Samiylo's bald head with such force that it cracked in two like a water melon, so Samiylo...

Phew, enough...

These horrible scuffles usually ceased some time around evening, and always happily. Everyone ended up alive and kicking, although there was a lot of puffing and blowing as passions died down. The *Otamans,* pale and battle-weary, dispersed to their camps with menacing glances.

My hot-tempered Grandpa took a long time to calm down. He was a passionate warrior and could drink a good pitcherful of cold water after the fracas, never forgetting to make the sign of the cross over it before.

"Well, I think it's time for lunch!"

"What do you mean — lunch? It's already time for supper," Father would say, glancing at the enemy camp with burning hatred.

After supper we turned in immediately. Sometimes I fell asleep before supper as I gazed into the starry sky, or at the Desna, or at the fire over which the gruel was being cooked. Then Father or Grandpa would try to rouse me, I would be unable to force my eyes open and would plunge back into sleep like a tench into an ice-hole.

Grandpa liked to sleep under an oak tree. Before he fell asleep he would yawn for such a long time and in such a relaxed manner that it was as if he was pardoning the whole world for its pranks, then he would talk to the mowers about his younger days, his life as a *chumak* and the times when everything was different. Judging from what he said everything was better then. The rivers and lakes were deeper, the fish bigger and tastier, there was an unbelievable amount of mushrooms and berries in the woods, and the woods themselves were denser as was the grass which even an adder could not push through.

"Say what you will but things are getting worse every day," Troihub sighed under a shrub.

"Exactly!" Grandpa philosophized under the oak. "Or the dews and floods that there were, and the marshes lying unspoiled. But now everything seems to dry up completely and go to waste."

"Yeah, that's probably how it all will end up," Troihub agreed, sighing through his sleep.

"And what swarms of mosquitoes there were!" Grandpa said excitedly, buoyed up by recollections. "You simply couldn't breathe, they were big as bears, believe me. And as for now, you couldn't call these creatures mosquitoes at all! They simply don't seem to exist any more. Or take the landrails. When they'd start craking in the night you couldn't get any shut-eye for the noise, so help me. Now it's just an occasional chirp here and there. Do you hear? It looks as if they're doomed too..."

Indeed, two landrails, who had been calling to each other in the grass by the Desna, became abruptly silent as if they sensed their fate was being discussed.

Listening to these conversations under the oaks made me sad to think that the world would be an ugly

one by the time I grew up with no more hayfields or fish.

"Who told you all that?" Father asked me when I crawled up to him and burst out sobbing.

"Grandpa did."

"Don't listen to him, son. He's an old man and doesn't understand much. Old people are foolish, and our Grandpa's not exception. Eating and story-telling is all he's interested in. As the saying goes, no man is wise at all times."

"Pa, and will the Desna dry up?"

"No, it won't. It'll be all right. Sleep now, enough."

"And there'll be no fish in it?"

"Oh yes there will. The fish are clever now, son. People used to be stupid, so the fish were stupid too. But now people've become wiser, and the fish, though they're smaller now, have, well, become a lot wiser and more cunning. They're not that easy to catch. Sleep."

I pricked up my ears. Something squeaked and silently splashed on the Desna. I strained my eyes — there was the light of a raft floating downstream. I picked up the sound of human voices and said, "Pa!"

"What's up, son?"

"Who are those people over there?"

"They're from far away, from Orel Province. They're Russians, coming from Russia."

"Who are we? Aren't we Russians?"

"No, we're not Russians."

"Who are we then?"

"Oh, who knows," Father drawled with a tinge of sadness in his voice. "We're common folks, sonny... Ukrainians, the ones who grow bread. Muzhiks, so to speak... Yep, nothing more than muzhiks. Once we were Cossacks, they say, but now it's nothing more than a name."

"Grandpa said that one time mosquitoes were big..."

"He did, did he? Of course, he should know better. He's been a *chumak* all his life and fed them and then squandered away his money on drink. It's terrible to think of what he did..."

"What do you mean?" Grandpa's guilty voice was suddenly audible.

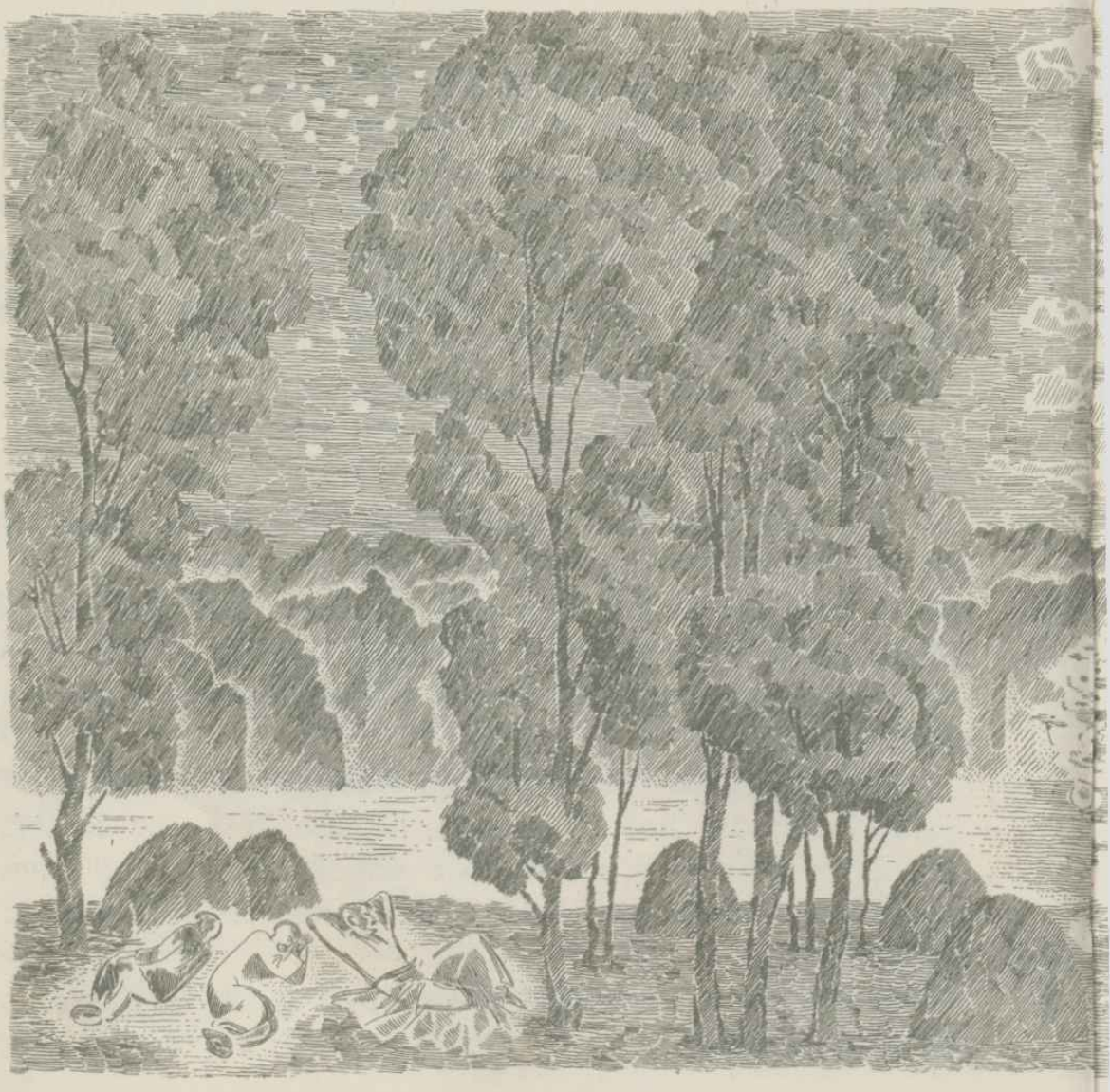
"You know what, so better be quiet," Father said somehow sadly into the night.

They went on arguing for a while, but I didn't understand everything they said. Drifting off to sleep, I only heard that in olden times not everything was that good in this great world. There was much misery and grief.

It grew quiet. The mowers snored under the oaks. For a long time yet Grandpa sighed, then he made the sign of the cross over his yawning mouth and over the oak roots and the Desna and fell asleep.

The landrails, quails, bitterns and some other birds started exchanging calls in the night and a large fish jumped in the middle of the Desna as I fell asleep.

Our weather forecaster on the hayfield for the past one hundred and fifty years or so was a crow. She was



our family crow, so to speak. She sat on a high poplar near our camp, from which she watched all us and everything we ate and drank, what fish we caught, whether we cut down a landrail with a scythe; she watched all the birds in the forest, heard everything going on around, and, most important of all, she foretold the weather. She could unfailingly predict the approach of rain or a thunderstorm when the sky was still cloudless; she would suddenly crow three times in a peculiar voice at which Grandpa would break out coughing for no reason at all and begin to yawn, after which we'd drop our rakes and pitchforks and, yawning as well, drop exhausted under the ricks. Uncle Samiylo was the only one who did not succumb to the crow's charms. Whenever she would crow he would shake with anger.

"Oh, drop dead! Begone, you evil spirit!"

Uncle Samiylo wasn't a professor, neither was he a doctor nor an engineer. As can be inferred from his name and from everything that has been said about him here, he wasn't a judge, nor a police superintendent, nor a pope. He did not have the capability to hold such high posts. He wasn't even a good farmer. As a matter of fact, he was considered a bad farmer. His intellectual abilities were insufficient for a trade so complex.

But, like most men, he did have one special talent of his own. He was a mower. He was such a great mower that his neighbors even forgot his surname and called him Samiylo the Mower, or simply The Mower. He wielded the scythe like a good painter wields his brush — effortlessly and deftly. If he had the chance he'd probably mow the grass off the surface of the whole world, provided it was good grass and he was sure of his bread and gruel in reward.

Outside of this talent, as is often the case with people whose talents are limited, he was an unwise and even helpless man.

However much he cursed the crow, however wildly he shook his fists at her, a large dark-blue cloud would push out from behind the forest within half an hour and the rain would begin.

The crow knew the ins and outs of everyone of us and could tell what was on our minds. Once when Father got angry about the rain which she had induced by her crowing, he asked Tikhin Bobir, the only hunter in the whole neighborhood, to shoot her with a gun. And what do you think happened? No sooner did Father close his mouth than she took off from her poplar and flew across the Desna to sit on a high oak. And although Tikhin categorically refused to shoot a bird against God's will, she returned from the oak only in the evening and brought down such a rain and thunder with her crowing that all the hay was spoiled.

Here the reader might say that such a crow is an untypical thing; and that the rain would have spoiled the hay anyway without her crowing and without Grandpa's coughing, that all this happened because of purely scientific reasons. Well, it's possible. But you see

my intention wasn't to write about typical things anyway. I'm just describing what once happened on the Desna right at the spot where the River Seim flows into it.

By the way, since we've mentioned the weather and the hunter who refused to kill the aforesaid crow, we might as well describe the hunter himself. To make the picture more complete we'll describe his inimitable character in a rather peculiar way, that is from the point of view of the ducks which inhabited our lake. This is not so much for style's sake as for that of greater truth, for, after all, it was he who killed the ducks and not vice versa.

"Oh dear, there he comes limping along," an old duck would warn her ducklings. "Off into the reeds! Look at him wobbling, blast his vile soul!"

The ducklings immediately hid themselves wherever they could, while the duck disappeared beneath the water. Silence fell on the lake. Tikhin was approaching the shore in the company of his spotted dog.

If the ducklings disobeyed and went on frolicking among the water lilies, the duck would be all of a dither:

"Help, he's aiming, look! Now there'll be a bang and feathers will be flying..."

Tikhin really was aiming from the shore.

"Watch out! Oh my God, that's the end of us. Now stop splashing around, you little brats!" quacked the duck in despair.

The ducklings clapped their bills shut and froze... Nothing moved anywhere.

Well, before the gun goes off we have some time to describe Tikhin from the human point of view.

Being a poor man, he had to become a sniper so as not to waste any extra rounds of ammunition. However, it did not often happen that he killed a duck. Why? The thing was that one of Tikhin's legs was at odds with the other. It was considerably shorter and thinner, and did not bend even in his sleep. As a result of such a freak of nature all the ducks, ponchards, gallinules, gulls and the rest of the feathered tribes inhabiting our lakes would spot him from afar and hide among the reeds or under the water lilies.

So you see even a lame leg can at times contribute to nature's harmony and balance.

Tikhin's gun also contributed to the harmony of nature to a great extent. It was such an ancient contraption that its owner always had to carry the trigger in his pocket and fix it to the gun the moment before shooting. Also, Tikhin liked to take his time about aiming.

"Come on now, fire," I'd whisper to Tikhin, with my heart thudding: the gun would go off any minute in a deafening bang! "Fire!... They're already swimming out!... Don't you see?... Come on, let her go!"

I quickly breathed in and held my breath. But the shot did not come. At the crunch it turned out that the trigger had disappeared. Where could it be? In all probability it had fallen into the grass. We looked everywhere in the grass and under the shrubs till sunset — no trigger. You should have seen how downcast I was. To add to this bad luck, there were ducks flying around all over the place.

Seeing that we were down in the dumps, the old duck brought the whole brood out of the hideout.

"Shoot, or have you fallen asleep over there!" came Father's voice from afar.

"No, man, it won't happen today. I've probably left the trigger in my waistcoat back home," Tikhin replied glumly and limped toward the village.

I was on the verge of tears. The dog also became glum and after fussing around for a while trudged off. The ducks rejoiced, frolicking and splashing in the water. It was already growing dark, but they continued their merry-making.

There's one more thing you should know: Tikhin never aimed his gun at anything else but ducks. No wonder, because landrails, quail, snipe and gallinules were in such plenty you could occasionally mow them down with a scythe or catch them with your bare hands.

As for all those woodcocks, great snipe or curlew we never knew they existed at all. Something would fly by the forest, but we did not know what the hell it was. You just hadn't the time to have a good look at them.

Wild animals were few. There were only hedgehogs, hares and polecats. Wolves had become extinct by then, and the word itself was for us no more than part of Grandpa's cussing like: "Oh, may the wolf gobble you up!" There were also lions, but rarely. Only once did I see a lion walking down the beach, and nobody has ever believed me.

It happened like this. Father and I had sunk the cord string with fishing hooks in the Desna and were returning to camp in our small boat which stood a mere inch above water level. The river was flowing fast, the sky was studded with stars, and it was so wonderful and easy going downstream. I felt I was gliding through blue space. I looked into the water — the moon smiled at me. I willed the fish to jump — and they jumped. I looked into the sky, hoping to see a star fall — and it did fall. The smell of grasses wafted across the river. I wanted to hear a sound coming from the grass — and presently a landrail started to crake. I looked at the haunting beach flooded with silvery light and wished for a lion — and a lion appeared. He had a large head, shaggy mane, and a long tussle-tipped tail. He was slowly walking down the beach.

"Pa, look, a lion," I whispered to Father, spellbound.

"A what? But it's a..." Father looked intently toward the beach and when our boat was on a level with the lion, he raised the oar and brought its flat side down on the water with a loud crash. Heavens, what a jump and roar the lion gave! Its echo rolled like thunder. My heart leaped into my mouth. Everything — the beach, the banks, the willows were gripped by terror. Father almost dropped the oar into the water, and, though generally a brave man, even he was unnerved and didn't move until the current carried us further downstream and pushed the boat to a steep bank. After sitting there quietly for about half an hour we turned round — the lion was gone: he had probably disappeared in the willows.

We kept the fire going at our river camp till morning.

For some reason I was both afraid of the lion and sorry for him. Father and I would probably not have known what to do if he'd start eating our horses or

Grandpa sleeping under the oak. I listened intently into the darkness to hear him roar again. But he did not. Before I dropped off to sleep I had a great desire to start breeding lions and elephants so that the world would be transformed into a beautiful place to live in from the dump it was. I was sick of seeing only calves and horses around me.

The next day we heard the news that the lion's spell of liberty had been short-lived. After a derailment near the town of Bakhmach the cage of the itinerant zoo got broken and the lion escaped. He was probably so depressed and sick of the spectators, the tamer, and everything else in this world that he decided to let things run their course and made for the Desna to find a bit of peace. He had covered no more than thirty *versts* before he was overtaken, surrounded on all sides and killed because he was a lion. After all, he couldn't go roaming about among the calves and horses. You couldn't possibly hitch him to a wagon. So what use could he be? It'd be a different thing if he could bellow or bleat — but his voice was unfit for this purpose: his roar made the leaves wilt and the grass droop... Oh well...

Wait a minute, what am I writing about? On second thought I realize it wasn't me in the boat on the Desna on that particular night. It was Father all by himself, while I was sleeping under the oak tree beside Grandpa. Anyway, the lion stalked on the beach! And somewhere near Spaske he was shot by watchmen.

I think I should stop writing about this lion and start describing domestic animals instead, because I am beginning to feel my pen hesitate: the editors within me are being roused. They swarm all around me. There is one behind my left ear, another under my right hand, a third at the table, and a fourth in bed — ready for a good night's editing.

All of them have a good sense of logic and abhor vagueness. They are set on making me write as much like everybody else as possible.

At the point where my heart cools they warm it up; where I start burning in the fire of my passions they cool down my brains to be on the safe side.

"Let it be," I say, "something will come out of it.

In my trade something must come out of it. Let it be, I beg of you!"

"No!"

"But why can't I write that as a boy living by the Desna I wanted lions to roam around everywhere and wild birds to alight on my head and shoulders in real life, and not only in my dreams?"

"That's not plausible, and, besides, the message might be misunderstood."

"But I was young and didn't have any common sense then. I had a feeling my dreams might come in handy some day."

"What for?"

"Well, maybe for happiness."

"We'll cross that out. After all you could have not met the lion, the more so since it's your fantasy altogether."

"What! I won't have that!"

"Take it easy. The lion can be replaced by something less incongruous. You could write more convincingly about horses. You had horses, didn't you?"

"I'm ashamed of writing about our horses."

"Why?"

"Because they were scrawny and ugly."

"Well, you can make them typical horses."

"There was nothing typical about them. They were mangy. Besides, our horses weren't any fun."

They certainly were not fun at all. So before describing them I'd better remember something enjoyable and come back to the horses later on.

Our dog Pirate lived with us for a long time. Elderly and large, he was a dignified and serious dog with two shaggy tails and two pairs of eyes, of which the upper pair, on closer inspection, turned out to be two red spots on his dark forehead.

Once at a fair in Borzna, where Father had been selling pitch. Pirate got lost. We felt sorry for him, but no more than that.

Five weeks later on a Sunday, right after lunch when we were all sitting by the house cracking sunflower seeds, who did we see loping toward us but Pirate — lean and starving. At the sight of the whole family and the

house he dropped to the ground and crawled on his belly for about a hundred paces, rolling over on his back from time to time and weeping loudly in bliss like the prodigal son.

"It's me, your Pirate, don't you recognize me?" he seemed to yelp. "Oh boy, how happy I am! You can't imagine how hard it was without you!... Honest to God, I nearly went mad with despair."

We were moved to tears. Even Father, who hated displaying emotions in public, almost burst out crying.

It's hard to believe that an ordinary dog could make such an impression on people.

Mother wept bitterly and murmured over and over with an enigmatic smile: "How do you like that? You'd think the poor dog was a human being. Just look at him crawling. Oh you devil!"

He was a good, clever dog, no doubt about it. He had a pleasant life with us, and not only because he was a loyal guard, but also because he was a keen worker. He liked to help around the house, taking on all kinds of jobs on his own initiative: carrying cucumbers in his teeth from the garden and piling them up in the orchard, drinking an extra hen's egg. He had a son growing up, also called Pirate, who was a bright and sportive puppy. He amused the whole neighborhood. Being a canine actor, so to speak, he liked to romp around, playing with the calf, piglets, hens, doves and geese — both ours and the neighbors'. At times he and his father would become so abandoned to their art that their games would end in the mutilation or death of their playmates. After this the two actors would quickly scamper off and lie low in the tobacco patch until the worst

was over, the feathers cleared away and their victims eaten.

Mother claimed that when we ate the roasted hens in the garden the two Pirates would watch the procedure from the tobacco patch and flash doggy grins at us.

"Drop dead, you two!" Grandpa would shout at them in a hideous way, throwing a bone at the actors.

At this the maligned actors made themselves scarce to keep out of harm's way, ruining the tobacco in the process.

What am I on about now? These aren't reminiscences, God knows what they are. Maybe it's time I went on to the horses?

Yes, the horses...

It seemed to me that horses and cows knew some evil secret which they would not tell anyone. I was conscious of their dark imprisoned souls and believed they had psychic powers, especially at night when everything was different.

We kept having different horses, because Father frequently bartered them at the fair. Some were sly and malicious, some had unhappy insulted souls of peasants, some — hag-ridden sinners bewitched to all eternity.

They were all different from us — oppressed and condemned irrevocably for all time to come. You could see that after sunset if you looked closely into a horse's large blue-black eye.

One horse we had was called Murai, and the other was Tyahnybida, which literally means Pull-the-Misery. Both of them were old, gaunt nags.

I don't remember, and probably no one else could tell for sure, what color they were. They were covered with scabs and would rub their sides against anything they came across.

Wherever you looked, on all the fence poles and gate poles you could see traces of their rubbing as though the whole yard was covered with scabs.

That's probably why there has never been a boy either in real life or in fiction who has dreamed so much about equine beauty as I, or is so ashamed of ugliness.

Murai was already old and dispirited. Tyahnybida,

though younger, brighter and kinder than Murai, had bad feet. When he'd graze in the marsh his feet would grow numb and he'd drop in the mud and have to lie there till morning, because horses, as you know, can't call for help. Waking up in the morning under the coats and jackets we had covered him with, he would be pulled by the tail to a dry spot, like some weird prehistoric creature. He let us do that listlessly, looking at us kids with gratitude and what we thought to be love. I liked him for his helplessness and his intelligence. He was an intelligent and kind horse, but nowhere in him did he have even a trace of that heroism and vitality which you find in songs and Christmas carols, not even the smallest trace. Dear me, what ugly horses we had! To this day I remember them with sorrow and shame, although half a century has passed since then.

With us they lived a hard life — a lot of work, bad fodder, worn-down harnesses, and no respect whatsoever.

At times Father would holler at them ferociously, and frenziedly curse and beat them, breathing heavily as the color drained from his face with rage.

One night, when I was lying in the hay by the Desna looking at the stars, I overheard a conversation the horses had while grazing after a hard day's work. They talked about us, about Father in particular.

"Do you know why he's so cruel?"

"No, I don't. I can barely stand on my feet after pulling loads all day."

"Do you think it's any better for me? Not likely! All I know is the bridle, the wagon pole, threats, and his cussing, of course."

"I know his cussing pretty well, too, heard enough of it. I feel very low."

"Same here. Once I used to gallop above the clouds," Tyahnybida raised his head and looked across the Desna. "For thousands of years, long before wagons and tillage, Prophets rode on my back. I still had wings then. One of my forefathers, so my mother told me, was a horse king, or god."

"I, too, had wings, but they're gone. I've got no wings now, no beauty, only sores on my back. He might at least have made a decent saddle, he hasn't got one at

all. Oppressed as my soul is by his unkindness, he still beats me every day, believe you me; I don't know if it's the same with you. What's the use of it all? I can hardly stand on my feet."

"That's true. But it isn't us he's beating."

"Oh, come on! What do you mean it isn't us? It hurts us, doesn't it?"

"It's not us he's punishing but his own ill luck. We're skinny, scabby, and haven't enough strength — that's the real reason. He's got an ancient and heroic nature, so why should he need someone like us? Yesterday when I got stuck with the wagon in the mud and he thrashed me with his whip and feet and yelled, tearing up his mouth like a lion, I saw in his eyes such glowering and fathomless pain that ours looks pale in comparison! Thought I: this hurts you, too, you poor wretched human!"

"Hush! Let's graze in silence. His boy is gaping at us from over there," said Murai, spotting me under the rick.

From that time on I never raised my hand against a horse.

"Let us in to sing carols!" I heard a girl's voice coming from outdoors. I looked through the window: no, it wasn't the full moon shining into the room from the starry sky on New Year's eve; through the little window, which was right opposite the *pich,* I saw a girl's round face rosy from the frost.

"Let us in to sing carols!" the girl said again.

"Go ahead, sing!" called Mother.

"For whom?"

"For Sashko!"

"Good lad Sashko walked around the fair, Holy Night..." four girls started to sing at once. I do not know whether it was because of the frost or because of the words of this carol sung on a winter night, but the song rang out so resonantly and clearly and the world immediately became so solemn that I, child though I was, almost choked with emotion. Pressed to the edge of the window under the emroidered *rushniks* * I was all ears.

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* *rushnik* — here a Ukrainian embroidered towel used for decorations

In a long and slowly paced song, which seemed to reach back seven hundred years, they sang about my fate. Listening to the beautiful lyrics, I began to imagine myself as a big strapping lad walking a horse around the fair, mingling with traders and merchants. I was supposed to sell the horse, because the words of the song went like this: "Oh my horse, my horse, my precious adviser, please tell me if I should sell you for a mere one hundred ducats?" My dappled mount, his neck arching, a red ribbon in his mane, whispered to me not to sell him, but to remember all the things he had done for me. I felt his soft gentle lips on my ears, as the girls sang words which I shall never forget for the rest of my days: "Can you have forgotten how we fought against the Horde, how the Turks fell dead in our wake, and oh, not only Turks but as many Tatars as Turks. And they chased us up to the steep bank of the quiet Danube — Holy Night..."

What was I to do? The enemy's horses were already neighing by the Danube and enemy arrows encroaching. Tearing my eyes wide open, I felt some supernatural power lifting me from the ground and carrying me outdoors right on the back of the horse and "He jumped o'er the Danube, yes o'er the Danube, without wetting his hooves nor the tip of the sword or the feet of his lord — Holy Night..."

From the banks of the Danube I returned home and what did I see: there was Mother singing and rocking the cradle. She had a far-away look in her eyes, as if she, too, was flying in the expanses of her heart like the girls behind the window in the frost under the star-studded sky. Oh, it was so beautiful! The water of the Danube — broad and deep — was so cold that it hissed. On the other bank the Turks and Tatars were raving mad because I had trampled down so many troops beneath my horse.

Then a second and a third group of girls sang carols. The things I heard about muself! I was rallying so many troops their number almost made the ground cave in. I was ramming the gates of foreign cities, plowing fields with gray eagles, sowing fields with little pearls, laying bridges of the finest wood, spreading carpets of pure silk,

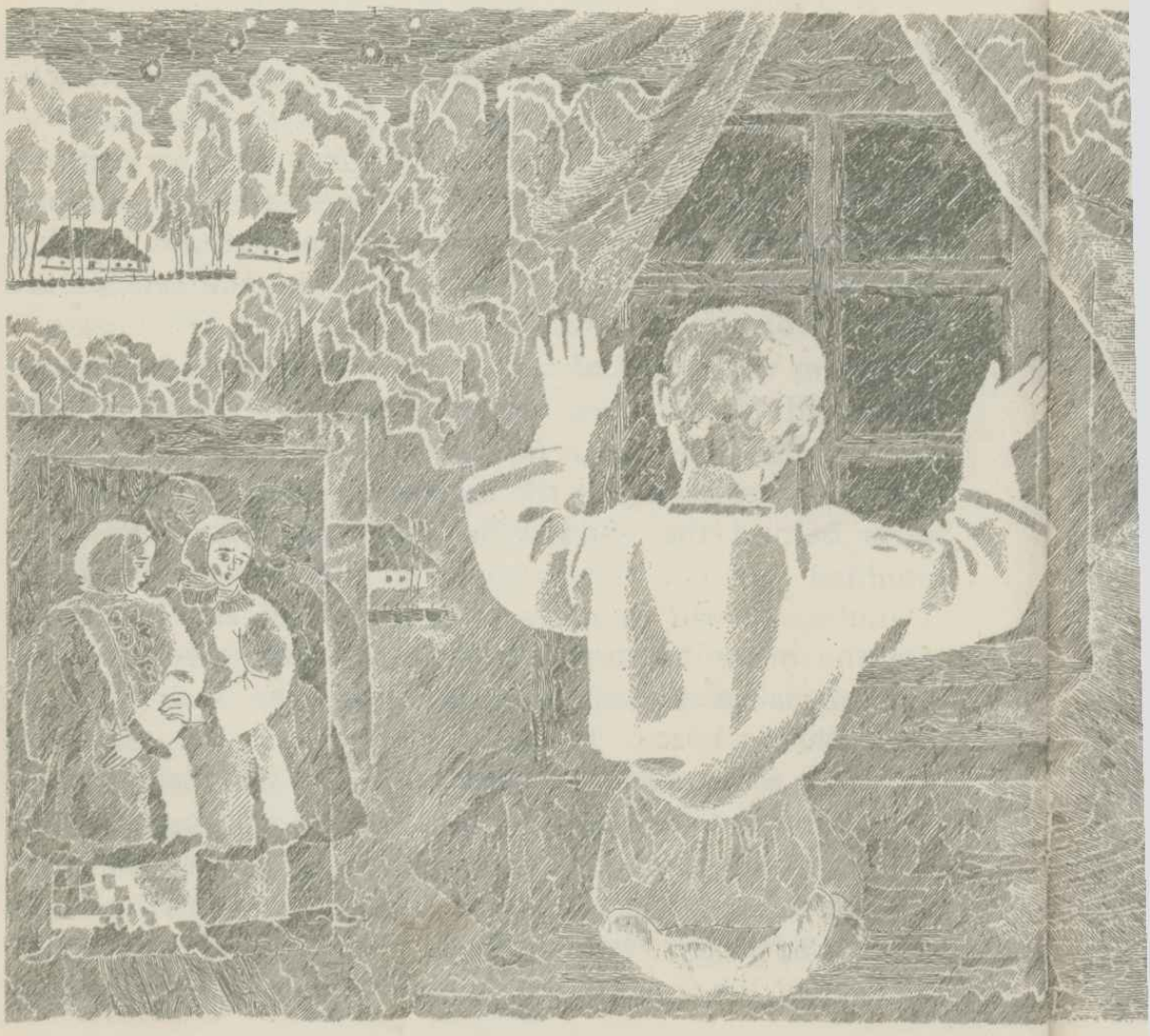
and wooing a lady, the daughter of a King, from beyond the Danube.

I rode through forests — the forests rustled. I rode across bridges — the bridges rang. I rode through cities — their residents met me and hailed me — Holy Night...

Then bleary-eyed I was carried to the *pich* by my parents. There I fell asleep on the rye grain surrounded by the sounds of music and held on fast to my dappled mount. There and then I promised never to sell him for whatever treasures. And I have not sold him to this very day. Oh my horse, my horse, I'll never sell you. However hard up I may be, however much the Turks and Tatars might urge me at the fair I won't part with you at any price.

That's what kind of horses we had.

Soon haying and harvest time was over. By the



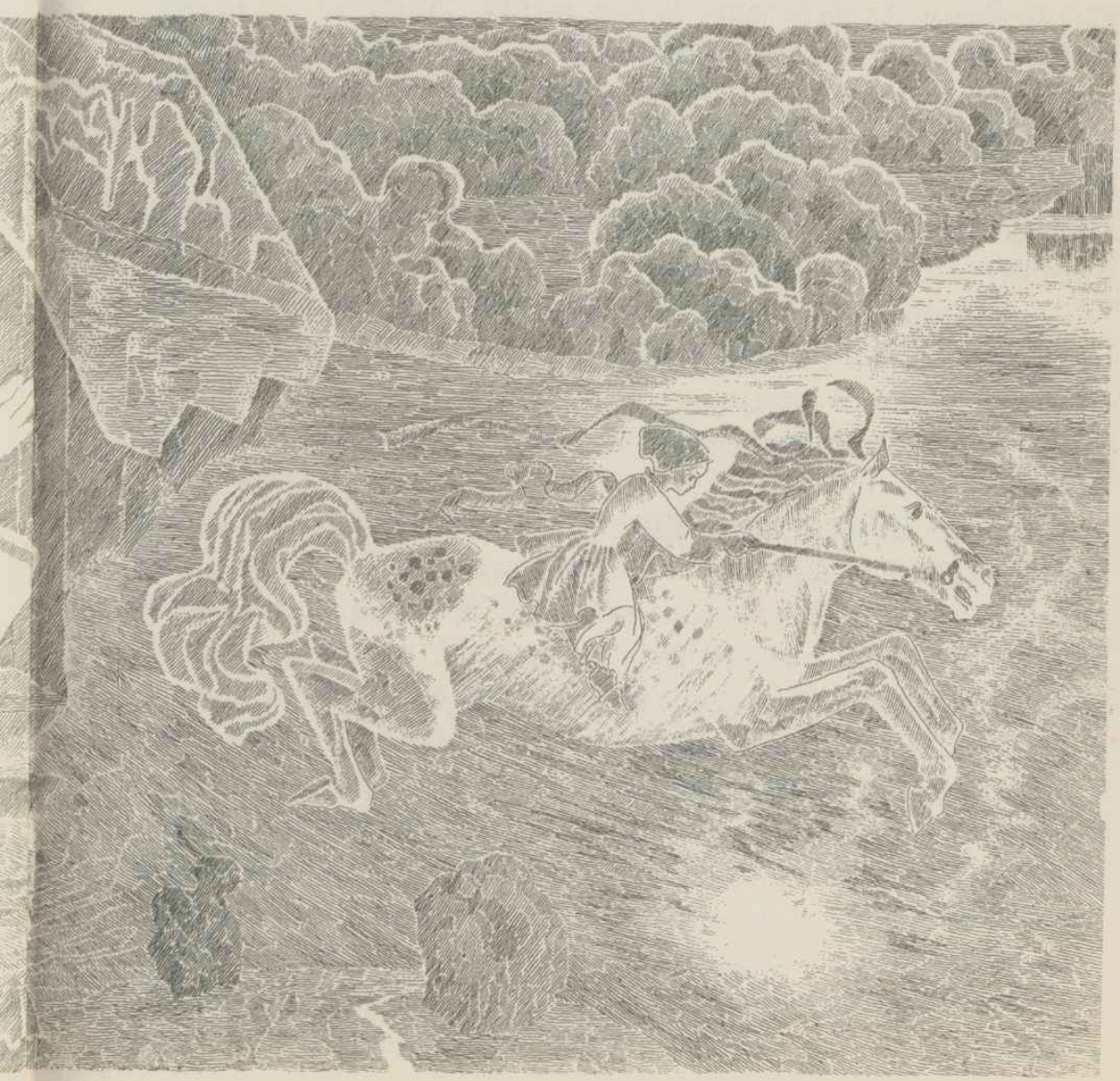
feast of the Transfiguration the pears and apples had ripened. The raspberries and cherries were picked long before that. My folks made me a new pair of long pants and Father took me to school.

The school master, Leontiy Opanasenko, was already advanced in years. A nervous and, apparently, angry man, he wore golden buttons on his coat and a cockade on his cap. To me he seemed at least as important as the police superintendent or the judge. He was taller than Father, which added to his menace.

"That yours?" he asked Father in Russian and his tired eyes gauged me from under his glasses.

"Excuse me, yes, that's my boy, or rather my youngest child," Father replied in a quiet foreign voice, submissive as in church.

"What is the name?"



"Sashko."

"I'm not asking you. Let him reply," he said to Father in a tone of an investigating judge and again pierced me with his gray eyes.

I remained silent. Even Father got a bit scared.

"Well?"

With one hand I took hold of Father's pants, in the other I clutched my cap and was about to utter my name when my voice failed me.

"What?" the teacher asked with a frown.

"Sashko," I whispered.

"Alexandr!" the teacher exclaimed and gave Father a disgruntled look. Then again he turned his eyes to me and asked the most absurd and stupid question, a question which only an elementary-school teacher could think up: "What is your father's name?"

"Father."

"I know he's father. What is his name?"

Well, how do you like that? Father and I looked at each other and instantly realized that we had lost our case. Father, however, still seemed to have a spark of hope.

"Well, tell him my name, sonny. Come on, don't be afraid!"

I vehemently shook my head and turned aside so abruptly that I would have fallen if I hadn't clutched hold of Father's pants.

A sort of nausea welled up in my throat. I felt bad, very bad.

"Come on, don't be silly. Tell the teacher now, speak up. Well?" Father wanted to prompt me his name, but he, too, was apparently ashamed. "Excuse me, he won't say it, he's still young. He's ashamed."

"He's not intellectually mature!" declared the not-too-clever teacher.

Father and I went home.

All this took place in those remote days of old when we had not yet achieved common sense. I did not know then that everything passes, sinks into oblivion and is lost in the continual flux of time, and that all our acts and mishaps flow like water between the banks of Time.

Am I being overindulgent in singing praises to my

old horses, the village and our old cottage? Could it be that I have confused my recollections and emotions?

No. I am not a spokesman for the old village, old people or olden times in general. I am a son of my own time and belong entirely to my contemporaries. If at times I look back upon the spring from which I once drank water and on my friendly cottage and send them my blessings into the remote past, I am only making that "mistake" which has been and will always be made by all people of all epochs and nations, as they recall the unforgettable charm of their childhood. The world unfolds before the clear eyes of childhood awareness and judgement. All the impressions of existence blend into an immortal, precious and human harmony. We can only pity the man whose imagination is dull and dries up, whose recollection of childhood and adolescence yields nothing dear and unusual, and whom nothing can warm or make happy or sad. Such a man is nondescript whatever his status, and his work, denied the warm rays of time, is doomed to be nondescript.

The present is always in transition from the past into the future. So why should I scorn the past? Why should I teach my grandchildren to scorn my dear and sacred present which some day will also become their past in the great era of communism?

In the past life of my parents there were many tears, ignorance and sorrow.

Their clouded hopes and futile expectations found their graves in drink and quarrels. All that fate allotted them was work, hard work. They all, in their own way, led unhappy lives — Great-grandfather, Grandfather, Father and Mother. Yet it seemed that each was born to love and had a gift for loving.

Probably they did not know or care for one another well enough. Anger and hatred, which they had abhorred all their lives, were planted surreptitiously in their hearts by a wicked sorceress, and all their lives they were haunted by the specter of deceit, but haunted in vain. Their whole life was sorrowful like that of primitive man.

They did not know how to change it, and yearning for things their time had denied them, remained unhappy.

But all that was so long ago that almost everything

has dissolved away like a dream in the remote haze of time. Only the Desna lives on in my tired imagination. The sacred, limpid river of my unforgettable years of childhood and dreams.

No river is now the way you once were, my Desna. There are no secrets in rivers any more, no peace. Everything is plain now.

There is neither God nor devil, and for some reason I feel sorry that there are no pixies or water sprites in the rivers any more. But nowadays you'll see lots of holidaymakers swimming around on a hot summer day to the irritation and, apparently, annoyance of the working men. Isn't that why to this day I am ashamed to rest where people work?

In my days the Desna was a deep and fast running river. No one bathed in it then, and hardly anyone lay around naked on the beach. We did not have the time for that yet. Apart from us kids, everyone was at work.

The girls, shy of taking off their clothes, did not bathe even on holidays.

The men thought it unbecoming to bathe because of an ancient custom. The women were afraid the water would wash away their health. So it was only us kids who bathed in the river.

The Desna was still a young maiden then and I was a puzzled little boy with green wide-open eyes.

Be blessed, Desna, my untouched maiden, for every time I remember you over the years I become kinder and feel infinitely rich and generous. You have given me enough gifts to last me my whole life.

My distant beauty! I am glad that I was born on your banks; that I drank of your soft, merry and ancient waters in those unforgettable years; that I walked barefoot along your enchanted beaches; that I heard the fishermen's stories in your boats and the old people's tales of the good old days; that I counted the stars of the overturned sky reflected in your waters; that to this day when I look down I realize that I have not lost the happy gift of seeing those stars even in the puddles of everyday life.

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